

Chapter 1

Da Tang Shuang Long Zhuan Alternative Name : Dragons Of Tang Dynasty, Twin Brothers Author : Huang Yi

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The Story

The story is set at the end of the Sui dynasty, which is on the verge of collapse. Everybody sees this as an opportunity to grab power.

Enter two orphans living on the street, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling. They only have their wits and each other. They just happen to get the precious martial arts manual Changsheng Jue, which makes them targets. They are rescued by Fu Junzhuo, a martial artist from Koguryo (Korea), and they accept her as their mother ... then she dies.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling study the Changsheng Jue, and become martial artists themselves – but more dangerous than their martial arts are their cleverness and

capacity for strategic thinking. Xu Ziling ambition is to merely get revenge for their mother (Fu Junzhuo), take care of their sister Susu, and have fun wandering around. Kou Zhong, on the other hand, wants to ... how can I say it in English ... “take over the world”?

And therein lies conflict. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, closer than brothers, are the most important people to each other in the world. Xu Ziling wants to do what’s right for the common people of China, and deep down, he suspects that Kou Zhong’s ambitions are not in the common people’s best interests. In the medium term, they are united by their desire to get revenge for Fu Junzhuo and care for Susu. Yet Kou Zhong does not want to give up his dream of demonstrating his might to the world, Xu Ziling does not want to let Kou Zhong cause suffering to the common people, and neither wants to destroy their relationship. In the long run ... something has to give.

Depending On Each Other For Survival

Yuwen Huaji stood straight up on the command deck of a warship, his eyes scanned both sides of the canal. It was not dawn yet. The lantern light of these five huge warship overshadowed the moon and the stars in the sky. Just like under the rising of his Yuwen Clan, the landlords[1] of the South had also lost the glory of their former days.

Yuwen Huaji was in his thirties; tall, thin, with long arms and legs, but his face looked old with repressed emotion, looked cold and detached. His pair of eyes was immeasurably deep, giving others the impression that he was a very cold and ruthless man, while striking fear in their hearts with his domineering air.

These five warships were built under the personal supervision of late Chancellor Yang Su during the founding of the Sui Dynasty; they were called the Five-Fang Battleships. Each ship had five decks, with total height reached twelve zhang [unit of length, 1 zhang approx. 3m or 10ft]. Each ship could accommodate eight hundred soldiers.

The five main sails were fully open, the ships glided on the water as fast as runaway horses, heading toward Jiangdu [county level city in Yangzhou, Jiangsu] further downstream of the canal.

Yuwen Huaji's eyes caught sight of the top of the palace towering beyond the treetops lining the bank; it was one of more than forty palaces built by Yang Guang, the Emperor Yang of Sui [569-618, reigned 604-618], along the river to be his imperial residences.

When Emperor Yang of Sui ascended the throne, to link the North and the South, he commissioned the people to dig the canal. Whether it was for military or economic purposes, there was indeed a practical need in linking the North and the South. However, carrying out large-scale construction, building imperial residences, and planting willow trees along the river, were a major waste of manpower and resources.

Zhang Shihe, his trusted aide, who was standing behind him, leaned forward and respectfully said, "We will arrive at Jiangdu before daybreak. If in this trip Zongguan [lit. chief manager] manage to obtain 'The Secret to Long Life' and present it to His Majesty, it would indeed be a great merit."

A mysterious smile escaped from the corner of Yuwen Huaji's mouth; he said indifferently, "His Holiness is fascinated with immortality technique concocted by the Daoist School[2]; it is

indeed ludicrous. If there really is this pill of immortality, there ought to be immortals long ago, but looking at former sages of the Daoist School, which one did not avoid death? If it were not that this book is woven out of black [or mysterious] gold thread, impervious of water and fire, we can randomly find someone to make a fake one and muddle our way through.”

Zhang Shihe said with a laugh, “After more than ten years of open enquiries and secret search His Holiness has discovered that this book has fallen into the hand of ‘Mountain-Pushing Hand’ Shi Long, who is regarded as the number one expert of Yangzhou. Funny thing is, that Shi Long obtained the book with an extravagant hope that he wouldn’t die, yet he will definitely die. It is indeed extremely ironic.”

Yuwen Huaji let out a cold snort and muttered Shi Long’s name under his breath. Immediately the blood in his body was boiling.

Over the years, due to his high position, he rarely fought hand to hand with anybody. Now the opportunity has finally come.

Great General Jiao Xie, under the ‘Sky King’ [orig. ‘fill the sky’ king] Wang Xuba, leading a dozen highly-skilled martial art experts under his command, was speeding along the Yangtze River, destroying the tranquility of the river banks. Wang Xuba was one of the militia leaders who wished to topple Sui Emperor from his rule over the land under the heavens [i.e. the whole

China]; he had considerable fame and power.

Since Yang Guang assumed the title ‘Emperor’, because he always strived to achieve extraordinary things, he repeatedly conducted military expeditions abroad. Furthermore, he indulged in a life of luxury, building numerous palaces and gardens, and went on inspection tour everywhere; hence he indiscriminately levied heavy taxes and made the people endured unspeakable hardship. As a result, robbers sprang up everywhere, those with power rose up to declare themselves ‘kings’. Sui Dynasty could no longer return to the grandiose of its founding days.

In that darkest hour just before dawn, outside the city of Yangzhou, which was established as the capital of Jiangdu County by the Sui Dynasty, lots of ships and boats, big and small, were moored on the dock upstream of the Great River. Specks of lantern lights filled the air, carrying with it some kind of unspeakable desolation in the midst of bustling atmosphere!

Yet Jiao Xie’s mind was loaded with the antique jade piece in his bosom, a jade piece carved with two characters ‘wan sui’ [lit. ten-thousand years, long live!]

It was the well-known treasured jade belonging to the Great General Shi Wansui of the founding of the Sui Dynasty. In those days, because he listened to slanderous report, the first Sui emperor Yang Jian [541-604, reigned 581-604] deposed Yang

Yong as the Crown Prince and set up Yang Guang in his stead. Shi Wansui was implicated and died of injustice. The minister who searched and confiscated his house was Yang Su.

This Yang Su was perhaps the most influential minister at that time. He went to war left and right, and triumphed in every battle; his merit was even more earth shattering than his Lord, hence he was at the receiving end of considerable suspicion and jealousy of the Emperor Wen Di [regnal name of Yang Jian].

Actually, Yang Su himself was unlike his contemporaries; he did not take part in conspiracy of rebellion, in amassing weapons, army provisions, wealth and riches; therefore, when not long afterwards Yang Su fell ill and died, and Emperor Wen Di wiped out his clansmen in one night, the Emperor failed to find Yang Su's treasure-trove.

Henceforth there was a rumor that whoever could find the 'Duke Yang's Hidden Treasure' would be able to unify the world [again, *i.e.* China].

And now the treasured jade has appeared, it has become an important trail in tracking down the treasure trove.

Seven days ago, somebody found this piece of jade in a pawnshop in Danyang [county, Zhenjiang, Jiangsu]. As soon as Wang Xuba received the news, he sent out his men everywhere

to track it down for hundreds of li [1 li is approx. 1/2km or 1/3 of a mile] before he was able to zero in on his target.

What's hard to understand was that if the pawnshop did indeed obtain the treasure, where were the other articles? Why was it that only this lightweight and well-known piece of jade managed to get out and thus revealed the secret of the treasure?

Right this moment, Jiao Xie's wandering mind abruptly came back to reality, for just beyond the place where the Great River met the canal, he saw the dark shadow of the sail, as well as the lantern lights of the five large 'Five-Fang Battleships'.

Jiao Xie's heart was shaken; immediately he waved his hand, signaling his men to leave the riverbank and entered the forest next to the shore.

Just east of Yangzhou city wall, there was a manor abandoned to thickets and undergrowth. For the most part the structure had already been worn down by years of disrepair. Eroded by the wind and the rain, invaded by termites, it was practically ready to collapse. Only one small brick room on the corner, under roof tiles full of holes, covered by wooden board, could barely be used for shelter.

From inside the dark room came the noise of someone moaning in pain, followed by the sound of a body rolling against

the floor.

A voice that sounded like it belonged to a child called out softly, “Xiao Ling! Xiao Ling! [Little Ling] Is it still painful?”

After more groaning, another young voice replied, “That damn Yan Laoda [boss, leader of a (usually criminal) gang], it’s really awful. Ay! Next time we have the goods, we must not go to that dead grass to do business. Not only he is mean and depressed prices, he still have to tell that dog-thief Yan Laoda. I just wanted to keep half a word hidden from him, and had to suffer extreme beating.”

The speakers were two street urchins who lived at that broken-down house. Their parents and family were fleeing the war and were killed by robbers, hence they became orphans. Two young boys met by chance and hit it off immediately, henceforth they depended on each other for survival, their relationship was closer than real siblings.

The slightly older one, Kou Zhong, turned seventeen that year, the younger one was called Xu Ziling, he was barely sixteen.

Kou Zhong crawled over on the woven mat on the floor in the dark toward Xu Ziling, trying to comfort him, “It’s alright as long as you are not beaten till your hands and feet are maimed. Even if he, Yan Laoda is as crafty as a ghost, he will suffer our wrath. Hey,

once he drank the water to wash our, two Yangzhou dragons, feet, as soon as we can grab hold of two more piece of silver, we will have enough travel expenses to renounce the dark and seek the light; we can join the militia.”

Disappointed, Xu Ziling lay down on the floor, while stroking his still burning jaw. “Actually, how much more do we need?” he asked, “I really don’t want to see that Yan Laoda’s crafty face anymore.”

A bit awkward, Kou Zhong replied, “Hey, we still need two taels [unit weight, approx. 50g (modern) or 1/16 of a catty (old)] and a half, a total of twenty-five qian [unit weight, 1/10 of a tael] to go.”

Xu Ziling sat up in shock, his voice breaking, “Didn’t you say a tael and a half? How come now it is two taels and a half?”

With a deep sigh Kou Zhong said, “Actually, how much more money we still need is not a big deal, the most disappointing thing is that Peng Xiaocai who failed to live up to expectations; only two, three times, and he is already fixed by the authority.”

And then he got excited as he grabbed Xu Ziling’s shoulders and said, “But don’t worry, when I went to Chun Feng Lou [Spring Breeze Inn, ‘lou’ refers to two-story building] to steal something to eat last night, I heard people say that nowadays the most powerful one is Li Zitong. The valiant generals under him are as

numerous as the cloud, such as Bai Xin and Qin Chaowen, who are top experts of the Wulin [martial art] world. Recently they subdued another militia army led by Zuo Xiaoyou; their fame and power are flourishing even more.”

Doubtful, Xu Ziling asked, “Didn’t you say earlier that the most formidable is Peng Xiaocai? And after him it was Yang Gongqing, who once defeated Yang Guang’s army in a surprise attack? How come now it is suddenly Li Zitong? Other than he, you also mentioned some Li Hongzhi, Hu Liumiao, Wang Deren, and so on; what roles are they playing?”

Obviously Kou Zhong was unable to answer his question. He hummed and hawed, and then with a sheepish smile he said, “In this whole wide world we only have each other, brothers; if you don’t believe me, whom would you believe? How can I point out a ‘black’ road for you to take? Based on my insight, I am sure we will be able to pick the most promising militia army. When we gain the whole world, based on our, two boys, vision and competence, I, Kou Zhong, will become, at least, the Prime Minister, and you will definitely be a great general.”

With a bitter smile Xu Ziling said, “Merely Yan Laoda is able to beat us that we cannot crawl up; how can I have the competence to be a great general?”

Puffing his chest, Kou Zhong said, “That’s why I force you to

eavesdrop Bai Lao Fuzi's [old master/teacher] lecture every day; also go to peek and steal martial art skill from under the large tree by Shi Long's training field. Vision and competence must be fostered; we will definitely be a pinnacle of virtue and ability. At least we can go back to become a state official in Yangzhou. When that time comes, Yan Laoda will be in big trouble."

With a deep frowned Xu Ziling said, "Right now I am hurting really bad, Bai Lao Fuzi is as boring as watching bird hatching eggs. How about early in the morning tomorrow?"

After thinking about it for a while, Kou Zhong yielded, "I'll let you go tomorrow, but you must take care of the early morning meal first. I want to eat the veggie steamed bun from Zhen Sao's [sister-in-law] graceful hands."

Xu Ziling groaned and lay back down on the mat.

[1] From the dictionary: land-owning class, esp. during Wei, Jin and North-South dynasties.

[2] From the dictionary: Daoist School of the Warring States Period (475-221BC), based on the teachings of Laozi (c. 500BC) and Zhuangzi (369-286BC).

Because the whole world was in chaos, thieves and robbers sprang up everywhere, everybody felt insecure; the first to prosper was naturally the dozen or so martial art schools and Taoist monasteries in the city. [Translator's note: in this book, the term tian xia - 'land under heavens' or 'the whole world' refers to China.]

Speaking about prestige, the one regarded as the foremost was Shi Long Martial Arena [actually literal translation would be 'field'], which was personally founded by Yangzhou's number one martial expert, the 'Mountain-Pushing Hand' Shi Long. For the last ten years or so Shi Long rarely managed the affair of the training field, everything was taken care of by his disciples. But since the martial school still bore his name, people were still coming in unending stream from far and near, attracted by the school's reputation.

Both in internal and external skills, Shi Long had already reached first-class master level; otherwise, how could his famous reputation not see decline for the last several decades? This man had a good character, did not marry, and lived alone in a small village courtyard at the outskirts of the city. Without having to set a foot outside, his disciples regularly delivered daily necessities. All day long he spent his time racking his brain to decipher the Taoist's book of treasured wisdom, 'The Secret to Long Life'.

According to the ancient legend passed on orally from one generation to the next, this book originated from Huangdi's

[Yellow Emperor, mythological emperor of China, c. 2697-2597BC] master, Guang Chengzi; it was written in oracle bone script, very deep and difficult to understand. Among former sages who have reviewed the book, although there was no lack of talents who understood the heavens, yet no one has ever able to master the subject or decipher the secret.

There were a total of 7,400 characters in the book, but only about 3,000 or so characters could be considered understandable. The book was densely packed with annotations made by the people who have reviewed it, but more often than not, these notes were even more confusing than the original text.

Fortunately, there were seven diagrams of human figure, all with different postures, and all were annotated with symbols, for example, red dots, arrows, et cetera. These symbols seemed to be telling some kind of Taoist cultivation method; but without understanding it, one must not practice it. If one hastened to circulate his inner qi [chi, vital energy] according to some of these symbols, immediately his qi and blood would boil, followed by fire deviation. It was extremely dangerous.

Shi Long has been sitting in front of this book day and night for three full years, but he gained nothing still; just like having a treasure chest in front of him, but there was no key to open the door.

This particular day he was meditating, when suddenly warning signal was flaring out in his mind. No matter what he could not focus his attention to the book. While he was deep in thought, a dry cough was heard from the main hall outside his room.

Shi Long hurriedly put the treasured book in his bosom, while myriads of thought flashed through his mind. He sighed and then said, "Noble guest honors me with your presence, please come in and drink a cup of hot tea!"

But the other party did not respond until he arrived just outside the door. It was only then did Shi Long realize that the visitor was also a first class martial art master.

By this time Jiao Xie has arrived at a forest just due north of the city; accompanied by his men, they jumped down their mounts and unleashing their martial art skills they entered the forest. Going over a small hill, they saw a broken-down temple down below.

Two of his men appeared, one of them came near and whispered in Jiao Xie's ear, "The target tarried in the temple the whole night, he did not even step out of the temple gate; apparently he is waiting for someone else."

Jiao Xie thought for a moment, and then he gave his orders. His men spread out to surround the temple. Only then did Jiao Xie fly

down. Reaching the gate, he said in a loud voice, “Life-Snatching Saber Jiao Xie, serving under the Sky King’s banner, received the Sky King’s order to ask Miss for guidance.”

‘Bang!’ The already dilapidated temple gate suddenly shattered into pieces that flew everywhere, while at the same time a woman’s figure appeared at the door.

Jiao Xie did not expect the opposite party’s response was both swift and fierce; his heart was shaken. His hand immediately reached the hilt of his ‘life-snatching saber’, which has helped him kill the enemy and gain victory over and over again.

The woman was wearing snow-white warrior outfit. With her outstanding good looks she stood with a sword in her hand. There was a bamboo rain hat on her head, tied under her chin with a strip of cotton cloth, covering her charming face above her fragrant lips, yet from the exposed part of her lower jaw, people could tell that she was indeed a rare beauty.

This woman was rather tall, with some a-crane-among-a-flock-of-chicken kind of proud and arrogant attitude. The exquisiteness and well-proportioned features, and the beauty of her physique were almost indescribable.

Especially impressive was a small mole, like a speck of paint, on the corner of her mouth, making her beauty even more

mysterious.

Jiao Xie was dumbstruck for half a day before regaining his composure. He was about to speak when a voice more beautiful than the immortal's lai [musical pipe with three reeds] came out of that woman's cherry lips, "You are finally here."

Jiao Xie jumped in fright; for a moment he forgot about Duke Yang's treasure. "Miss is waiting for us?" he asked in astonishment.

An incomparably touching smile floated out of the corner of the woman in white's mouth. In a gentle voice she said, "I am waiting for anybody to come to try my sword!"

'Ring!' The woman's blade left its sheathe. A thick cold sword aura engulfed Jiao Xie.

Jiao Xie has roamed the Jianghu for more than half of his life, he was extremely experienced; just by looking at how the woman pulled the sword, he knew right away that he had met the most fearful swordsman in his life. Not daring to be negligence, he let out a wild roar while stepping back and pulling his saber, while shouting his order for his men to show themselves.

There was neither hatred nor enmity between them, but as soon as they met they already used fierce and ruthless method to

deal with each other. It was the first time he encountered such situation.

The woman's sleeve fluttered, the tip of her sword rose up suddenly and sharply. Biting cold killing aura immediately permeated the air.

Jiao Xie knew he must never let the opponent gain the upper hand. With another wild roar both his body and his saber rushed forward together to become a blur of saber shadow, surging toward the opponent like a tide.

By this time his men had rushed over to cheer him up.

The woman in white let out a tender shout while rushing diagonally and leaped above Jiao Xie's head. Like a lightning the sword struck down.

'Dang!' Sword and saber collided.

An irresistibly huge force swept pass through the saber, Jiao Xie felt as if a thunder has stricken the pit of his stomach. Unexpectedly he was unable to hold his stance and was forced to tumble back.

Just a brief encounter like that and he had already suffered a big loss, it was also the first time Jiao Xie had ever experienced it.

But he could also see that the strength behind the woman in white's sword was indeed overbearing.

The woman in white did a somersault in the air and landed between two men standing at the edge of the battlefield. Her body spun, her sword flew, those two men were thrown out and were no longer able to get up.

These men were used to have blades on their heads and lick blood from their bodies, they were brave and fierce in battle; this situation has roused their vicious spirit instead, hence with no thought of personal safety they charged forward bravely.

The woman in white let out a cold snort, the sword in her hand turned into hundreds and thousands sword shadows, like a ghost or a demon it easily penetrated the men's ferocious attack. Wherever the blade reached, a man would fall down and die. No matter which part of the body was hit by the sword, the victim always dropped dead. As soon as the five viscera [i.e. heart, liver, spleen, lungs and kidneys] were shocked by the sword aura and shattered, the person died.

By the time Jiao Xie managed to regulate his qi back, only four of his men remained, strenuously fighting to defend themselves; he could not refrain his blood from boiling as he threw himself to join the fray.

Finally the last man fell. The tip of the sword rose up again to meet Jiao Xie's Life-Snatching Saber head on.

Jiao Xie gave everything he had. By the time he took the sixth sword strike, unexpectedly the refined steel of his Life-Snatching Saber was cut into two by the opponent's sword.

Jiao Xie was shocked. He threw the remaining saber in his hand toward the opponent as if it was a secret projectile, while at the same time raised his qi to push himself backward.

With a tender laughter the woman spin her body around. Not only she evaded the shooting broken saber, she also threw her sword away.

Jiao Xie could see very clearly the sword was flying toward him, and he still had time to think about different ways he could evade the sword, but by the time the sword passed through his body, he was still unable to come up with any response that might save his life.

The woman in white casually pulled her sword from Jiao Xie's body, as if what had just happened was nothing, and then she simply floated away.

“Those who attain can also aid the country, those who are poor can only support himself; Shi Xiong [brother, generic term] really

aims to idealism. This kind of ‘advancing opens the possibility of offense, retreating opens the possibility of defense’ thinking will enable one to conduct oneself with clear conscience. I, Yuwen Huaji, am full of admiration.”

Shi Long knew that the opposite party was reading his own inscription hanging on the main hall’s wall, and used it to mock him. However, his self-cultivation was profound; hence he did not take any offense. Still sitting calmly in his chair, he said flatly, “Turns out it is the preeminent martial art expert from Yuwen Clan, one of the four powerful clans of the current age. Isn’t Yuwen Xiong busy serving His Holiness? How could you have time to leisurely visit an outsider, a rural commoner like me?”

With his hands behind his back Yuwen Huaji strolled into the hall. He swept his gaze around the room first before finally he fixed his eyes on Shi Long’s face, who was sitting as steady as a mountain. He sighed and said, “I have Shi Xiong to blame, the trouble you are giving me is not trivial. You obtained the treasured wisdom that can prolong life, which is the envy of every scholar who practice Taoism, yet you did not even offer it to His Holiness, causing his dragon heart to be displeased. I receive official salary as a small pawn to run errands; I came here to see if Shi Xiong is a discreet person who understands the situation.”

Shi Long groaned in his heart that the situation was indeed serious.

It was the first time that he ever dealt with someone from the Yuwen Clan. The master of the Yuwen family was Yuwen Shang, whose reputation was most resounding. Under him were precisely the four martial art masters; one of them was precisely this Yuwen Huaji, who was serving as the Imperial Bodyguard Zongguan of Emperor Yang of Sui, who was also the most well acquainted with Jianghu people. Rumor has it that after Yuwen Shang, he was the first person who mastered the secret family skill, 'Black [or Mysterious] Ice Energy'. It's just that Shi Long has never expected that he looked this young, he seemed to be no more than thirty.

Since Wei, Jin and North-South dynasties[3], one distinguishing feature of influential families was what these families develop from generation to generation. The so-called 'high house' or 'powerful house' was entirely different [orig. 'as rivers Jing and Wei separate clearly'] from the common populace. There was a saying, 'there is no poor and humble family in the upper class, there is no influential family in the lower class'. Whether it was in economics or politics, the land-owning class always enjoyed enormous privileges.

By the time the founding emperor of Sui Dynasty unified the world, they started to use imperial examination to select government officials; it was only then did the dominance of 'powerful houses' become somewhat broken. But powerful houses had not disappeared.

The four powerful clans whose name shook the Jianghu were Yuwen Clan, Li Clan, Dugu Clan, and Song Clan. They had tremendous influence in economics, politics, as well as in Wulin. Among these four clans, only Song Clan belonged to the southern part of the country, having blood relationship with Han people, dealing with orthodox schools. The other three clans were in the north, their ties with non-Han people were rather close.

Yuwen Clan itself was a non-Han family, but they already embraced the Central Plains' culture, hence they were not considered foreigners anymore.

Although Shi Long's mind was racing at the speed of lightning, on the surface he was still unruffled; he slyly said, "This Ol' Shi has always been wild and uncouth; he has never understood how to fawn. Moreover, he is a man that is amenable to coaxing but not coercion [lit. eats soft food but refuses hard food]. I can't say for sure, but perhaps when hard-pressed he might disregard everything and burn both jade and common stone, and destroy the book altogether. Wouldn't Yuwen Xiong be at a loss on how to report to your master then?"

The two of them started fighting a battle of words, no more politeness, the atmosphere became very tense.

After staring at Shi Long for quite some time, he said in astonishment, "If Shi Xiong could destroy the treasured book,

then that book must not be Guang Chengzi's 'Secret to Long Life'. Besides, destroying it is not a big deal, only with that kind of attitude, Shi Xiong would do more harm than good toward all scholars of the Taoist way. Perhaps disaster might even reach their parents and children. Aren't two schools Taoism and Buddhism both emphasizing accumulation of merit and being merciful? Shi Xiong is apparently going against these decrees!"

Shi Long could hear the threatening tone, clearly it was not an empty threat. Finally his countenance changed slightly. Right this split second when his attention was divided, Yuwen Huaji made his move; his punch split the air.

The day before yesterday was the beginning of the Great Heat[4], the weather was blistering hot. But as soon as Yuwen Huaji made his move, the air in the hall immediately became incomparably strange cold. If not for the fact that Shi Long's internal energy was refined and pure, perhaps his teeth would have been chattering.

But it was not easy for him either.

To counter a punch by this kind of master, one must distinguish clearly the gust of wind created by the fist and then break the enemy's strike. But Yuwen Huaji's cold strike seemed to be there yet it was not quite there. It seemed like the air all around was stirred up by him, it pressed on Shi Long from top, bottom, left,

right, front and back. This kind of attack, where the target was not obvious, brought up the most annoying feeling: that he was helpless to counterattack.

Yet Shi Long was still calmly sitting in his chair; his clothes, from top to bottom, began to swell.

‘Bang!’

Two streams of qi collided, forming a vortex surging everywhere and all directions with Shi Long at its center. Table, chairs and other furniture were swept away like dead leaves, flipped over and broke down, and rolled away in all directions. Finally only Shi Long was left in the middle of the hall, still sitting in his chair.

Astonishment appeared on Yuwen Huaji’s face as he held back his fist.

Color like a wisp of red clouds appeared on Shi Long’s old face, a sign that he was restraining himself.

Yuwen Huaji roared in laughter as he said, “You deserve the title Yangzhou’s number one. Unexpectedly you are able to resist my fist relying on your pure qi to protect your body. Just based on this point, let me, Yuwen Huaji, advise you nicely. If Shi Xiong hand over the treasured book in good faith and from now on you

go into hiding and live incognito, I would do my part according to Jianghu's principle, to let Shi Xiong have a horse and leave. I am saying this with good intention, without any malice whatsoever. Whether you will live in honor or die in disgrace, Shi Xiong may decide in just one word."

Shi Long felt this was extremely ridiculous. After obtaining the Taoist's 'Secret to Long Life', he thought about it so hard that his brain almost burst, yet he did not gain anything. In fact, his mind was more free and peaceful before he got the book. Now because of this book he has offended the current emperor, so much so that the Emperor seized this opportunity have his disciples killed. As if that was not enough, he also had all local martial art schools disbanded, to have this region's armed force annihilated. Wasn't this precisely 'the disaster of cherishing treasure'?

Of course he was not stupid enough to believe that just because he handed over 'The Secret to Long Life', Yuwen Huaji would simply let him go on a horse. Based on Yang Guang's ruthlessness, how could he ever let him go free?

Just now he had exchange one move with Yuwen Huaji. He could see very clearly that the opponent's 'Mysterious Ice Energy' was indeed some kind of fantastic, matchless swirling, cyclone-like force. Compared to common straight [orig. 'there and back without delay'] force, it was a lot more difficult to fathom, a lot more difficult to defend. But even though he knew that he knew,

he still could not think of a way to break it.

Shi Long was a well-known character in Jianghu. In this instant he suddenly hardened his heart, determined that even if he had to lose his life, he would not let this treasured book fall into Yang Guang's hand. Otherwise, due to the horde of talents under Yang Guang's command, he might really be able to decipher the oracle bone script in the book and grasp the secret to long life, and then he would become an immortal tyrant. If that really happened, even ten thousand deaths would not absolve Shi Long from the blame.

Shi Long threw his head back and laughed aloud. After laughing twice, he shook his head and said with a sigh, "This book is not brought together by karma, obtaining it only bring bad luck and harm. If Yuwen Xiong has the ability, you may take the book back to that muddled ruler and let him read. If he died from reading it, don't blame me, Shi Long, for not giving you a fair warning."

While speaking, he circulated and gathered all the strength in his body. Immediately his ears could hear all faint noises within ten zhang circumference around him, even the sound of ants walking could not escape his hearing. Right away he could also hear the long, slow breathing of a dozen of people. Evidently the martial art experts surrounding him had deep cultivation both internally and externally.

Yuwen Huaji looked up at the main beam in the middle of the hall; he sighed grimly and said, “Not only Shi Xiong is not a discreet person who understands the situation, you are pigheaded as well. Only, remembering that it was not easy for Shi Xiong to make your name, I, Yuwen Huaji, am willing to let you gather your power, so that you can strike with all your strength, Shi Xiong may die with your eyes closed.”

Shi Long suddenly flew up from his seat; without his feet even touching the ground, he flitted across about a zhang of empty space, and in a blink of an eye he was already in front of Yuwen Huaji. Both palms pushed forward, like a typhoon his qi shot forward, immediately a tidal wave force surged toward the opponent.

At the same instant, the chair he was sitting in a moment ago suddenly disintegrated and crumbled to the floor, a proof that when the two of them exchanged blows just now, Shi Long had already suffered defeat; he was unable to block Yuwen Huaji’s ‘Mysterious Ice Energy’ so that the chair bore the consequences instead.

Yuwen Huaji’s eyes shot lightning, but at the same time he was greatly stunned. Shi Long knew perfectly well that the strength of his own qi could not match the opponent’s ‘Mysterious Ice Energy’; why did he strike with such a direct force without leaving any leeway for himself?

But right now he had no time to ponder about this question. When martial art experts exchange blows, victory and defeat were only a hair's breadth apart. Although he had confidence in himself that he could beat Shi Long easily, but if he lose this decisive opportunity, turning the table around would still be extremely difficult; on the contrary, he would face the danger of losing or even dying.

Not daring to hesitate, he floated back three steps first, and then pushed forward again. His two fists separately shot toward the hollow of Shi Long's palms.

'Bang!' Two streams of qi collided again; this time the resultant force shot upward, sending the tiles flying away, opening up a large hole on the roof.

With Yuwen Huaji's ability, he was still forced to floated backward and thus neutralized the incredible pressure from Shi Long's 'Mountain-Pushing Palm' with which he criss-crossed the Jianghu unhindered.

Shi Long's situation was even worse; he was jolted backward.

Without his feet touching the ground, Yuwen Huaji spun around in a small circle, abruptly and swiftly, he suddenly arrived in front of the wall where Shi Long's back was crashing onto; like a bolt of lightning clapped in an empty space a burst of energy

wrapped around Shi Long's body, aiming toward his back. It came from a very clever angle that one could not help but gasped in amazement.

Shi Long opened his mouth and a stream of blood shot out like an arrow toward the pit of Yuwen Huaji's stomach; while at the same time he arched his back to receive Yuwen Huaji's Mysterious Ice Energy strike directly.

Yuwen Huaji was surprised that Shi Long would resort to such a strange tactic of destroying himself to launch an attack; hurriedly he stopped his body and bent his waist backward, dangerously missed the blood arrow by a hair's width.

Shi Long groaned inwardly for the missed attack, but his whole body was jolted severely, the qi protecting his body was shattered, dozens of extremely cold Mysterious Ice Energy entered his back and invaded his inner core.

Shi Long knew that it was the decisive moment whether he would be able to protect 'The Secret to Long Life' or not; giving everything he had, he roared wildly while resolutely resist the powerful qi that was pulling him forward, and then rapidly he withdrew toward the wall behind him.

As soon as Yuwen Huaji saw this, he knew something was amiss; quickly he straightened up his body. Gathering up all his

strength, he sent out a punch through the air.

But he was still one step too late.

As soon as Shi Long's back bumped against the wall, a revolving trapdoor opened, carrying him into the other side.

'Crash!' The trapdoor disintegrated, revealing another small room behind it, but there was no trace of Shi Long.

Yuwen Huaji stayed calm; throwing himself to the floor, he pressed his ear against the ground. The sound of Shi Long's wild escape in the underground tunnel, which was also quickly fading away, entered his ear.

[3] Between Han and Sui, c. 220-589.

[4] The 12th of the 24 solar terms, 23rd of July to 6th of August. Check out Wikipedia if you want to know more, keyword 'solar term'.

Facing Imminent Catastrophe

The City of Yangzhou gradually woke up.

As soon as the city gate was opened at the mao hour [between 5-7am], traveling merchants, peasants, all kinds of people fell over each other to enter the city. The boats and ships that arrived the previous day already unloaded their cargo on the docks; they also took this time to deliver their goods into the city. All at the same time carriages and horses were moving together; hence it was so noisy.

From Yangzhou going east down the Yangtze River, one could sail to Japan [lit. dwarf country], Ryukyu Islands, and Southeast Asia, making Yangzhou one of the nation's most important transit centers to foreign lands; hence it was more bustling compared to any other city.

But today the atmosphere was a bit strange; there were a large number of officers and soldiers inside and outside the city. The crossing checkpoints were also a lot more stringent than usual, resulting in long queues. However, although everybody was

burning with anxiety, nobody dared to open his mouth to grumble. Because anybody who was used to roam the Jianghu could see that mixed with local officials, there were not a few big men wearing the uniform of the Imperial Bodyguards. Unless one did not value his life anymore, who would dare to offend these tyrant Imperial Bodyguards from the Capital?

There were a total of five markets in the city. The most flourishing one was the South Gate Market, which faced the Yangtze River. There were at least a few dozens stalls offering all kinds of food or food products, big and small. It was indeed an ideal place for the would-be travellers, who were ready to embark their boats, to get their breakfast.

Other than being an important hub, since ancient times Yangzhou has been well-known across the country for its prostitutes [烟花 can either be prostitutes or fireworks]. Whether it was young master of rich merchant with ten thousand strings of cash in his belt, or self-proclaimed literary talent, romantic scholar, or licentious swordsman, if they have not been here at least once, they could not be considered a romantic hero. [Translator's note: I don't think these people came to Yangzhou to enjoy fireworks.] Therefore, it was obvious why Yangzhou was flourishing.

Among the food stalls in the South Gate Market, Ol' Feng's vegetable and meat steamed bun [baozi] was the most famous. On top of that, the sales lady was Ol' Feng's young mistress, Zhen

Sao [lit. Sister-in-law Zhen], who had countenance of a flower, face like the moon. She became the living advertising board to drum up business. By the time the Ol' Feng brought out a tray full of steaming hot vegetable and meat steamed buns from the kitchen, the impatient customers who have been waiting outside immediately scrambled forward to hand over the money in their hands.

While Sister-in-law Zhen was busy and dripping wet with fragrant sweats, suddenly a big head belonging to a teenager stuck out from the crowd; with big smile on his face [orig. 'brows raised in delight and eyes laughing'] he said, "Eight vegetable and meat steamed buns, please. Zhen Sao, how are you?"

It was Xu Ziling. Because he was afraid Ol' Feng might see him, he deliberately hunched over that he was half as tall as the other people; his posture looked quite comical, actually. Fortunately his features were unusually charming; his eyes were long and lively, his nose straight and the bridge of his nose was quite high, his forehead wide, the corners of his mouth curled up in smile as bright as the sunshine. If not for his face was greasy and dirty, his clothes were shabby, plus he was beaten up by Yan Laoda that his face was blue and his lips swollen; so his appearance right now was quite unsightly, hence people did not have any reason to compliment him.

When Sister-in-law Zhen saw him, the first thing she did was casting a worried look over at the Ol' Feng and the evil first wife in

the kitchen; seeing that they did not notice the situation over here, she was relieved. While serving the other customers, she pretended to protest coquettishly, “No money yet you want to imitate other people buying steamed buns?”

With a forced laugh Xu Ziling said, “Just a bit of delay, none will be lacking, tomorrow I will definitely pay you back.”

With the quickest movement Sister-in-law Zhen grasped four steamed buns; after a slight hesitation she picked two more, and then wrapped everything nicely in paper, and stuffed it into his hands, while scolding him in low voice, “This is the last time. Ay! Look how bad you have been beaten.”

Xu Ziling squealed in joy and withdrew from the crowd. Straightening up his back, his appearance looked a lot better instantly.

Although he was very young, he had grown to be as big and tall as fully-grown men. His shoulders were wide, his waist narrow; it's just that due to undernourishment he was relatively thin.

Squeezing through a row of fruit and vegetable stalls, he bumped into Kou Zhong. Reaching into the bundle he grabbed a steamed bun and stuffed it into his mouth, while mumbling with his mouth full, “Is it really the last time?”

Kou Zhong was a year older, but he was half a cun [a thumb, approx. an inch] shorter. His shoulders were wide, his upper arm bulging. He looked rather thick and solid. Although he lacked Xu Ziling's elegance, he had a broad face and big ears. All in all, he carried a strong masculine aura, with a free and happy-go-lucky attitude, which was unusually attractive; his eyes were deep but looked quick-witted. In short, he was in no way inferior to Xu Ziling, making people believe that in the future this kid would definitely not be a nobody [orig. an object in the pond]. However, his clothes were 'patched on the east and stitched in the west', it was even more filthy than Xu Ziling's; in fact, it was just as bad as a little beggar.

Xu Ziling was eating his third steamed buns. Suddenly he frowned and said, "Don't you say that Zhen Sao is basically a good person? Nowadays, how many people in Yangzhou are as kind-hearted as she is? Too bad her parents owed money, plus her old dad considered money as important as life, so that he sold her to the Ol' Feng as a mistress. Laotianye [God, Heaven, lit. old master of the sky] must be blind."

By this time the two of them already left the market and reached the main street, mingled among the stream of people heading out of the city via the South Gate.

With his tummy full, Kou Zhong wrapped his arm around Xu Ziling's shoulder; glancing to the left and right, he said, "Fat sheep are especially many today, it is best to find a bit older, with

gorgeous clothes, walking alone, looks like he had a lot of loads in his mind, and won't even know if he loses his wallet. That kind of old idiot."

With a bitter laugh Xu Ziling said, "That time it was you, this muddled egg, who wanted to find an old man as a target. And then when you saw him scrambling on the ground and crying out to heaven, you pretended to pick it up and give it back to him, in the end I was beaten up by Yan Laoda."

Kou Zhong was unabashed, "Don't forget that I only wanted to return half of that old man's money; it was you who wanted make that man happy and insisted that I should stick to the original plan and return the whole thing to him, and now you are blaming me? Hey! But as thieves, we also have principles, so we can be considered good men. Ha! Look!"

Xu Ziling followed his gaze, and just happen to catch sight of a fifty-something old scholar, walking in the direction of the city gate. He was well dressed, but had an anxious look on his face, as he walked hurriedly with his head down. He fit Kou Zhong's description perfectly. How could there be such a coincidence?

The two of them stared blankly at the old man, and then they noticed that the back of his clothes was bulging, apparently he carried his purse hidden on his lower back.

Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "Whether we'll meet with the lady luck or not, we only need to see whether this fellow looks impressive but is worthless or not."

Xu Ziling anxiously said, "I really need to pay Zhen Sao back."

As the two of them hurried run after the old man, suddenly they saw a platoon of soldiers coming from the opposite direction. They were greatly shocked and quickly turned around and entered a small alley, and from there they run across toward another alley, which lead to another street big enough for sedan chair, which ran parallel to the southern wall of the city.

The two of them plopped down to sit by the wall. After sighing for their bad luck, Kou Zhong came up with another idea, "Maybe we'd better try entering the imperial examination. Although the material we know coming from eavesdropping Bai Lao Fuzi's [see Chapter 1] lecture, at least it's better than those good-for-nothing people in class who pay a lot of money to listen to stories. If our names make the list, not only we won't need travel expenses anymore, we don't need to take the risk of a long and difficult trek; we'll be high-ranking officials."

With eyes blazing with fire Xu Ziling said, "Joining the militia is your idea, and now you want to enter imperial examination. You think it is as easy as taking a peek at those young ladies from the Spring Breeze Courtyard [i.e. brothel]? After all ..."

Kou Zhong suddenly elbowed his ribs and winked. Xu Ziling looked up toward the street, and saw the old scholar was actually also running away in panic just like them. Even when he looked toward them, he did not seem to see them but just hurrying along toward the big street. The two of them were ecstatic at this unexpected turn of events, they sprang up and ran after him.

Time for the operation.

The old scholar was such in a hurry that he did not even notice the clothes on his back was cut. Just now he wanted to leave the city via the South Gate, but was scared by the tight border security that he drew back. He knew it was not suitable for him to go out, yet he was afraid to return home; calling on a friend, he was even more afraid he would implicate other people. While he was hesitating, a shadow flashed, someone was barring his way.

While the old scholar was shaking in shock, more men appeared from left and right and seized him that he was not unable to move a single step.

The one blocking his way was Yuwen Huaji and one of his men. With a smile on his face this martial art expert from the Yuwen Clan walked over toward the old scholar. After seizing him up from top to bottom several times, he said in a bored tone, "Isn't this gentleman Jiangdu's rising poetry and literature scholar Tian Wen Laoshi [teacher]? I heard Laoshi is a good friend of Shi Long

Shifu [simply a respectful form of address for older men]. Just now we took the liberty of paying an official call on Tian Laoshi's respected residence. Unexpectedly, without suspecting anything, we managed to dredge up Shi Shifu's body from the bottom of the well. And now Tian Laoshi seems to be in a hurry to leave; I wonder what was the reason?"

Tianwen's countenance was changed greatly; he could not find anything to say. By this time the people passing through the street knew that something was not right, but seeing that among the men surrounding Tian Wen was their own captain of the local garrison, who would dare to be implicated by interfering?

Meanwhile, the two men grabbing Tian Wen from both sides did not stay idle either; their hands were busy searching Tian Wen's whole body, but they were unable to find the book that was supposedly in his possession. Zhang Shihe personally did the search. Before long he discovered that the back of Tian Wen's clothes had been cut with a sharp weapon.

"Not good!" his countenance changed, "The book is gone!"

Yuwen Huaji's eyes flashed with cold rays as he called out in deep voice, "Chen Shoubei!" [Translator's note: Shoubei practically means 'on garrison duty'. I am not sure his actual military rank, although earlier I said 'captain'.]

Chen Shoubei, who normally tyrannize people, quickly stepped forward. As his eyes met Yuwen Huaji's, his knees buckled and he dropped down kneeling on the ground, "Lowly officer's here!"

Yuwen Huaji coldly said, "Seal the city gates immediately. While you are at it, catch all thieves and local ruffians in the city for me. If we can't find the thing that His Holiness wants, they can forget about keeping their lives.

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were sitting side-by-side in a secluded alley by the East Gate, staring blankly at the book in front of them. Deeply disappointed, Xu Ziling said, "Next time we want to steal, we must never target those that look like a school teacher. This weird book with undecipherable handwriting is more difficult to understand than the Heavenly Book [mythical book of heavens]. Aren't you the Zhong Shaoye [young master] who often brags about your great erudition and scholarship? Tell me, what is this written on the top?"

Kou Zhong proudly said, "How can I be like you, a mere kid without learning or skills? This book must be a secret martial art manual from the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors era [the earliest system of Chinese historiography]. We can train it, we will be unequalled under the heavens that even Shi Shifu will have to step down gracefully. Just look at these diagrams of human body, this is the secret to circulate qi along the channels. Ha! This time we come across a treasure. Look! Did you notice the marvelous quality of the paper?"

Xu Ziling could not stop laughing. "Don't blow your horn too loud. Just read a couple of characters let me hear it. I want to see how good your education is."

Kou Zhong has always been proud of his age and experience; his eyes were gleaming as he said, "If somebody could write it, then there must be somebody else who could understand it. Let us find an old scholar with the most learning, we'll ask him to interpret these strange characters for us. Besides, we, the two dragons of Yangzhou, have specific responsibility to train martial art. This is called dividing up the work in collaboration, each on in his proper place. Do you understand?"

With disappointment in his voice Xu Ziling said, "Do you think you are the Zongguan [see chapter 1] of Yangzhou? Who would listen to us and do our bidding? Right now we, the two snakes of Yangzhou, have a more pressing problem at hand: food. Looks like we will have to take the money we save for traveling expense and exchange it for a couple of steamed buns to feed our tummy. I'll say it is a bit more practical."

Kou Zhong laughed aloud. He stood up, hid the book in his clothes again, stretched, and said, "Let me, Zhong Shaoye, take care of lunch. Come! Let's go home first to get some money, and then we go to the docks outside the city to do some damn business that requires no capital. Afterwards we run away as far as we can; otherwise, if that stinky Laoda discovered that we have

some treasured book in our bosom, we will be in very big trouble.”

Recalling the fierce beating he received the previous day, Xu Ziling broke out in sweats. He sprang up and sneakily followed Kou Zhong back to the abandoned courtyard, their ‘home’.

Yuwen Huaji was sitting in the main hall of the Zongguan Mansion, drinking tea; serving him was Yangzhou Zongguan, Yuchi Sheng. Not only these two men were well-acquainted with each other, the relationship between them was more than casual. Before Yang Jian established the Great Sui Dynasty, he was a high-ranking minister of the Northern Zhou Dynasty [557-581]. Later on, after Emperor Xuan of Zhou [? not sure about this one], Yuwen Yun, died of illness, Yang Jian colluded with Internal Historian Physician Zheng Yi and Imperial Justice Physician Liu Fang. Arguing that the successor of the throne, Yuwen Shan, was still underage, they acted in the pretense of following imperial order by calling Yang Jian back to the imperial court to take over the government.

One year later, Yang Jian forced Emperor Jing to abdicate, and proclaimed himself as the new Emperor. Henceforth, the Yuwen Clan’s Northern Zhou’ world now belonged to the Yang Clan. Yet because Yuwen Clan’s influence was deep-rooted, although becoming the Emperor, Yang Jian was unable to completely uproot the Yuwen Clan. By the time his son Yang Guang became the Emperor, Yuwen Clan rose up in power again. Strictly

speaking, although on the surface the Yuwen Clan was loyal toward the Sui Dynasty, there was a hatred buried deep in the deepest of their hearts.

After Yang Jian usurped the throne, there were three separate attempts by different high-ranking officials who supported the Yuwen Clan's Northern Zhou to rise up in rebellion, namely Xiangzhou's Zongguan Yuchi Zhou, Zhengzhou's Zongguan Sima Xiaonan, and Yizhou's Zongguan Wang Qian. These people did not have any family relationship with the Yuwen Clan, they were simply loyal to the royal family of the Northern Zhou. One of them, Yuchi Sheng, was precisely Yuchi Sheng's paternal uncle; hence the reason these two people had close relationship. Therefore, even when talking about secret matters, they did not have the slightest bit of worry.

Yuwen Huaji sighed and said, "This book is really very important. I have prepared some experts. As soon as we obtain the treasured book, we will pretend that we manage to break the secret, and let that incapable ruler train it. I guarantee that within three months, he will die of the training. Who would have thought that there are many twists and turns in getting that thing that ought to be in our hands right now? We can't even make a fake copy."

With a cold snort Yuchi Sheng said, "Even if the treasured book did not exist, I am afraid it would be difficult for the Yang Clan to protect their throne. The Heaven blesses the Great Zhou. Ever

since that incapable ruler usurped the throne, internally he screws taxes out of the people by force, he carries out large scale constructions; externally he engage in wars of aggression at will, engaging the Korean Goryeo in the military expedition to the east. Three battles and three defeats. And now rebel armies are everywhere. As long as we can seize this opportunity, we can restore the Great Zhou's glory of the past."

Yuwen Huaji's eyes were gleaming with cold rays; he said in deep voice, "Yang Guang's days are numbered. What I worry about is the other three powerful clans, especially the Li Clan that must not be taken lightly. Their Clan Leader Li Yuan[1] is the nephew of Empress Dowager Dugu's maternal aunt; that's why they enjoy the Yang Clan's trust much more than our Yuwen Clan. The longer we fail to wipe out the three powerful clans, our Great Zhou's restoration will undoubtedly come across considerable resistance."

After a short pause, he continued, "In regards to foreign power, Turkic ethnic group[2] is the biggest threat. Right now the rebel armies are allying themselves with Turkic people to borrow their influence, and thus increasing the Turkic's power. Moreover, Turkic's four masters' martial art skill has reached perfection. Thinking about it indeed makes one anxious."

Yuchi Sheng said, "I am under the impression that you don't have to worry about the Li Clan. Although Li Yuan is Yang Guang's maternal cousin, just based on the fact that this man is giving

favor to a lot of people far and wide, and thus he made friends with heroes everywhere, Yang Guang is very jealous of him. Right now Li Yuan is too busy to defend himself. As long as we can plan our move, deepening Yang Guang's suspicions toward Li Yuan, we might be able to kill him with borrowed knife; hence we will reap the fisherman's benefit."

A smile appeared in Yuwen Huaji's eyes. As he was nodding his praise, Zhang Shihe came in to report, "We have a bit of progress!" Yuwen Huaji and Yuchi Sheng were greatly delighted.

Zhang Shihe said, "According to Tian Wen's confession, before he was arrested, he came across two ruffians, about fifteen, sixteen years old. It seems like these two boys were the ones who stole the book."

Yuwen Huaji happily said, "And Shihe must have had investigated these two ruffians clearly; that's why you came to report."

Zhang Shihe laughed, "That is correct. These two boys, one is called Kou Zhong, the other Xu Ziling. They are Yangzhou's most famous pickpockets. Their boss is called Yan Kuan, right now he is in our custody to help us finding those two fellows."

Yuchi Sheng laughed aloud and said, "That's an easy thing to do. Unless they can grow wings, as long as they are still in the city,

they won't escape our grasp."

Yuwen Huaji breathed a sigh of relief and sat back down in his chair, as if the treasured book has already been in his hands.

The two boys had not had any chance to get the dozen or so five-zhu [1/24th of a tael] coins strung together, when Xu Ziling, who was on the lookout, saw the dejected Yan Laoda being dragged by a dozen or so big men toward the abandoned garden. Xu Ziling was very sharp; although he was greatly shocked, he knew he had to hasten quietly to the rendezvous point with Kou Zhong, and then together they slipped into another broken down room that only have three remaining rotten walls. They hid inside a hole in the ground, which they made especially whenever they wanted to avoid Yan Laoda. It was covered with a fake floor, made of wooden planks, strewn with fallen leaves, sand and stones, leaving only a small crack for ventilation purpose.

'Crash, bang, thud, crack!' Noise of overturned wooden chest and falling object unceasingly entered their small nest. Soon after they heard Yan Laoda's bawling, apparently he was being severely beaten up by those men.

Although they really wished someone would beat Yan Laoda to death, but listening to his situation right now, they still could not bear it.

They were greatly puzzled as well. What had happened? After all, in Yangzhou Yan Laoda had a bit of reputation and power, he had more than twenty brothers as his underlings. More recently, he took the Hall Master of the Bamboo Flower Clan, Chang Ci, as his father-in-law. But in front of these men, he seemed to be even lowlier than a pig or a dog.

A grim and sad-sounding voice was heard from further down the path, “Go search!”

Hearing this, the two dragons of Yangzhou immediately turned into two coiling snakes as they tried to curl up as small as possible, did not even dare to take half a breath.

Yan Laoda’s trembling voice was heard, “Gentlemen [orig. ‘daye’ – big master], please give me a bit more time, we will definitely get the book back, I can guarantee with my head ... aaahhh!” Evidently if he was not punched, then he must have been kicked.

Footsteps were heard very close to the hole, followed by someone calling out, “Still can’t find them?”

Yan Laoda’s voice was hoarse with pain as he was begging for mercy, “Please give me another chance, these two wretched kids must have gone to Shi Long’s martial art training field to peek at people training martial art there. Aahhh!”

The grim and sad-sounding voice spoke, “We closed Shi Long’s martial art training field this morning; there is not much to look at over there.”

A short pause, and then, “I want four of you to stay here, wait for their return. And you, this scum, take us to all the places those kids might stroll to one by one. Quick, drag him up!”

The footsteps died away.

Inside the hole, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other; they both see the other’s face was as white as a ghost. Almost at the same time both of them recalled the dark culvert heading out of the city by the East Gate.

Right now that was their only hope.

[1] Personal name of first Tang emperor, Gaozu, 566-635, reigned 618-626.

[2] Turkic people are collection of ethnic group that live in northern, eastern, central, and western Asia, northwestern China, and parts of eastern Europe,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkic_peoples

Far And Away From Yangzhou

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stripped stark naked. First, they washed their clothes clean by the creek, then they spread out the clothes on the thickets next to the bank to let it dry in the afternoon sun. They put 'The Secret to Long Life' on a rock. Finally they shouted gleefully as they dive into the stream to wash away the grimes and the stink from crawling inside the dark culvert.

They were still kids, after all. After running for their lives to this forest on a hill, about seven or eight li [1 li is approx. 1/2km or 1/3 of a mile] from Yangzhou city wall, they were so exhausted that they did not feel like moving anymore. Also, thinking that they were already far away from danger, their moods turned a lot better.

While they were playing and singing happily in the water, suddenly they hear tender snort coming from the creek's bank. At first they were startled and scared, and quickly looked at the direction of the noise. But then they saw a woman wearing snow-white clothes, with a bamboo rain hat on her head, was standing

gracefully on the shore. With her pair of cold eyes that was hidden behind a white gauze veil, she looked at them, sizing them up, without any care whatsoever that they were stark naked.

The two boys squealed in terror and quickly ducked inside the water, instinctively their hands went down to cover their lower parts. With a squeaky voice Xu Ziling cried out, "It's improper to look, Dajie [big sister] please avert your noble eyes; spare us!"

Kou Zhong also cried out, "Looking once you have to pay one wen [1/10 of a tael, approx. 0.5gram (of silver)]. Miss already looked at least a hundred times; even with fifty or perhaps sixty percent rate, you need to pay us about a hundred copper coins and then you may go."

An ice-cold smile appeared on the corner of the woman-in-white's mouth. "Little demon is asking for it," she said lightly.

Stretching out her lily-white hand, which was as slender as a spring scallion, she casually flicked her two fingers. 'Pop, pop!' The two boys screamed in pain and fell down to the water.

It was quite a while before they finally emerged from the water, still in a lot of pain.

The woman-in-white spoke matter-of-factly, "When Miss asks you a question, you answer with an honest answer; otherwise,

you, these two little demons, will suffer more pain.”

By this time Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling have already withdrawn to the other side of the creek. But since they were still naked, they did not dare to crawl out of the water. Unable to neither advance nor retreat, they were completely at a loss.

Kou Zhong has always been able ‘to see the wind and set his sails’; therefore, he forced a laugh and said, “Lowly ones know that we cannot not speak, and speak cannot not be honest. [I know it sounds awkward in English, but Chinese loves to use double negative.] Miss, please go ahead and ask.”

Seeing he was trying to talk bookish talk, yet his appearance was nondescript, the woman-in-white let out a cold snort and said, “I ask you, what kind of guts you, the little demon, have?”

Xu Ziling was shocked. “All along we, two brothers, have never known how to tell stories. Miss, you may ask us anything.”

The woman-in-white still maintained her wooden expression. With a voice as calm as the water she asked, “Do you live near here?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other. And then one nodded, the other shook his head. Another flick of her fingers, their knees went weak and they tumbled into the water again. As

before, it was quite a while before they were able to struggle up, battered and exhausted.

As if nothing had happened, the woman-in-white calmly said, “If I hear one more lie, don’t even think that you will be able to crawl up again.”

The two boys were very scared of the woman-in-white’s ruthlessness, but they have already developed resilience from receiving Laoda, Yan Kuan’s bullying. With a forced laugh Kou Zhong said, “Dashi [lit. great scholar/bachelor/member of senior ministerial class; I don’t know how to translate this properly], you misunderstood. I nodded because I certainly live in my in-laws village nearby. And he shook his head, because he lives in the city. Today this brother of mine especially went out of the city to have fun with me. So now Dashi can see that we are indeed innocent.”

Hearing the smooth talk and the laughter, Xu Ziling hastily covered his mouth, afraid that he might provoke this evil Luochoa [demon in Buddhism, as in Yu Luochoa, White Haired Demoness].

But the woman-in-white remained unmoved. “If I hear more flippant answer, I’ll gouge your tongue out of your mouth. Why do you call me Dashi?”

Xu Ziling was afraid Kou Zhong might ramble, he busily said, “Just because you are wearing long white robe like Guanyin Dashi

[Goddess of Mercy], he is honoring Big Sister as Dashi. It is just a show of respect, there is no other meaning.”

At this point, this scene was really weird. An enigmatic woman as cold as ice and frost, coldly dealing with two stark naked boys, embarrassed and were in a difficult situation, hiding in the water. If an outsider was to witness this scene, even if he rack his brain until burst, he would not be able to guess the relationship between them.

The woman-in-white’s eyes fell onto ‘The Secret to Long Life’ lying on the rock by the shore. “What is that?” she asked.

Not missing a single beat, Kou Zhong reverently and respectfully replied, “That is the book of the sages that Bai Lao Fuzi’s [see Chapter 1] wanted us to study. Would Dashi like to read it?”

Evidently the woman-in-white did not know that it was a very important book, because the fact was that from the outside, this book was not much different from any other book. Therefore, she only took a couple of glances, and then her eyes were back to the two boys. “Do you know this man Shi Long?” she asked in a heavy voice.

Seeing she no longer care about their ‘secret manual’, the two boys inwardly wiped the sweats from their foreheads, while

scrambling to answer at the same time, “Of course we do!”

“Tell me then,” the woman-in-white said, “Why are his house and institution teeming with soldiers and officers? And Yangzhou city gates are all closed?”

Kou Zhong pretended to be surprised, “Is there such thing?” he said, “We have been here since early in the morning catching fish. Ah! Xiao Ling, how are you going to go back to the city?”

Although Xu Ziling knew he was lying, looking at his serious manner[1], he almost believed it was true. Assuming a pained expression on his face, he exclaimed in shock, “Mother is going to kill me.”

Suddenly he felt Kou Zhong nudged him; realizing his intention, he said, “That won’t do! I must return to the city immediately. Hey! Dashi, would you turn your back momentarily, so that we can go up and put our clothes on?”

The woman-in-white did not have any intention of turning her back to them. With a cold snort, without seeing how she moved, she was already deep inside the forest.

The two boys slumped down into the water, and then they floated back up. Kou Zhong sighed and said, “This stinking b1tch is really formidable. Someday after we master unrivalled martial

art skill, I must strip her naked and look at her mother's body until I am satisfied."

Xu Ziling was really afraid she might come back, giving Kou Zhong a little push, they crawled up to the shore. "She might be very ugly," he said with a wry smile, "Anyway, you have seen her enough."

After they were fully dressed, Kou Zhong hid the treasured book well, and then with a deep frown said, "What crime did Shi Long commit anyway? Not only his martial art arena is closed, even his house is being raided."

Xu Ziling said with a sigh, "It seems like training martial art is useless. Let's roll! Every time I remember that bunch beating Yan Laoda, 'my heart alarmed, my body leaps in fright'."

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "How can martial art skill be useless? Just look at my 'stepping on dry land' technique. Ow!" He only took two steps when he tripped on a stone and fumbled down that he had to crawl on all four.

Xu Ziling doubled up in laughter, and momentarily was not able to stand up.

The two boys crouched inside a thicket on a knoll overlooking the lower reaches of Yangtze River. They were dumbstruck to see

three big warships and hundreds of speedboats close to the city, inspecting all departing boats.

Kou Zhong sucked in a breath of cold air, “My grandpa!” he gasped, “That book of ours must be a Heavenly Book [see Chapter 2].”

Xu Ziling whispered in Kou Zhong’s ear, “Would Zhong Shaoye lower your voice a bit so we won’t alarm them? Perhaps there are militia army mingle among them, otherwise, their number would not be that big.”

Kou Zhong rubbed his empty tummy. Suddenly he was hit by realization, “If the river route is like that, I am afraid the land route is being closed as well; we’d better find a place to hide. Oh, my God! Isn’t that the sound of dog barking?”

The two of them listened carefully, and their countenance changed drastically. It was obvious that the dog bark came from the direction of the creek. Now they could also hear the sound of hoof beats. They thought that if the dogs’ sensitive nose had already picked up their scent from their old hole in the ground, would that mean they were in a very big trouble?

They both shuddered. And then with a scream they ran for their lives into the depth of the forest in the mountain.

They ran over a small hill, but as they were rushing downhill, Xu Ziling tripped. He groaned and rolled downhill. Kou Zhong ran over and pulled him up, “Hurry up!”

Xu Ziling said sadly, “I can’t walk anymore. Take the secret manual and go quickly! In the future when you have mastered matchless divine skill, come back and avenge me. No matter how fast we run, we can’t outrun dogs’ legs and horses’ legs anyway. Right now I can try to divert the enemy; it’s your only hope to escape with your life.”

Kou Zhong did not even want to think about it. He lugged Xu Ziling toward the sparse wooded area ahead as he cried out, “If we die, we die together; otherwise, how can we be considered brothers?”

Suddenly he had a brainwave. Changing direction, he ran toward the Big River [i.e. Yangtze]. By this time they could clearly hear the sound of barking dogs and the hoof beats.

Xu Ziling cried out in horror, “Are we going to throw ourselves into the river?”

Gasping for breath, Kou Zhong replied, “This is the only way. As soon as we are in the water, you have to hold on tight to me no matter what. Otherwise, if the river rushes you back to Yangzhou, it would be like sending the lamb to the tiger’s mouth.”

Xu Ziling recalled the evil bunch who beat up Yan Laoda, he thought that drowning in the river sure beats being beaten to death. Without saying anything, he summoned every ounce of his strength, which was not much, and ran after Kou Zhong toward the cliff by the riverbank.

Kou Zhong roared wildly. With both hands he grasped Xu Ziling's hands and shouted, "Don't look; just stake everything you have and jump. Let's get it over with."

[1] Serious manner, orig. seven emotional states: joy, anger, anxiety, thought, grief, fear, fright.

The rumbling river down below sounded very loud from up above the cliff, making them utterly terrified.

"Aaahhhh ...!" With a roar the two of them jumped from the cliff down to Yangtze River, more than ten zhang [1 zhang is approx. 10ft or 3m] below.

The wind whooshed in their ears.

'Splash! Splash!' One after another they both fell successfully into the raging river and immediately sank into the water.

In the strong current, they had to struggle hard to float to the

surface. Xu Ziling started to see stars, while desperately trying to hold on to Kou Zhong's shoulders. Kou Zhong himself was not any better, sinking and rising, he drank a lot of river water, as the current brought them more than ten zhang downstream. Let's not talk about crossing the river, trying to keep their heads above the water proved to be almost impossible.

While they were thinking that this time their little lives would be gone, a fishing boat crossed the current toward them. A long rope flew out of the boat, accurately coiled itself around Kou Zhong's neck.

Actually, with Xu Ziling's arms holding tight to him, Kou Zhong had already found it difficult to breathe; plus the river water unceasingly pouring into his nose and mouth. Now with the rope wrapped around his neck, he thought that the soldiers had finally got him.

While he was crying inwardly, saying goodbye to the world, his ears heard the pleasant voice of the woman-in-white, "Idiot! Why haven't you held on to the rope?"

Kou Zhong was ecstatic. Freeing one hand, he desperately hung on to the rope. He felt a strong force transmitted via the rope. Miraculously the two of them were being pulled out of the water, and flew sideways toward the small boat.

The two boys rolled along the deck like a pair of gourds, with only half of their lives remained.

With one pull the woman-in-white raised the sail, and then she sat on the bow, staring at the two boys without looking happy at all.

Kou Zhong rolled up first, and then, seeing Xu Ziling also survived, he groaned, and then begged the woman, “My Guanyin Dashi, lady Bodhisattva, please be merciful to us, quickly set sail, evil people are after us.”

The woman-in-white already heard the sound of hoof beats and barking dogs. She said with a cold laugh, “What qualifications you have that you dare to offend Sui people’s dog soldiers? They are actually after your Miss.”

Kou Zhong remembered something. “Heavens!” he screamed, “Our secret manual!” He reached out to grope around his back.

The woman-in-white only knew that he was anxious that the holy book was damaged by the water; she did not pay any attention to these two words, ‘secret manual’. Grapping the sail, she steered the boat upstream.

After throwing up two mouthfuls of water, Xu Ziling crawled up. “The book?” he asked in horror.

He saw Kou Zhong groping around his back several times, with a very strange expression on his face. He made all kinds of signals to Xu Ziling as he sat up. With his back toward the woman-in-white, he winked and said, "Completely soaked. This time Bai Lao Fuzi will definitely slap my hands black and blue."

The woman-in-white said with a snort, "You still want to lie to me? Let's see if I don't throw you, these two little demons, back into the river."

Kou Zhong was shocked; he thought she already saw through the secret of the book. Turning around, he said, "I did not lie to you. Honest. The book is finished."

With displeased expression the woman-in-white said, "I am not talking about your book, I am talking about what kind of game are you, two little demons, playing? Didn't you say you must return to the city? Why do you want to go farther away now?"

While the two boys were at a loss of what to say, there were shouts coming from the riverbank. They raised their heads and saw a dozen or so riders galloping along the river. "Stop the boat!" they shouted.

The woman-in-white did not move; she turned a deaf ear. She did not even look at them, as if it was beneath her to do so.

Suddenly there was a long whistle from a distant, but coming closer at an astonishing speed.

The woman-in-white was amazed, “I did not expect there is such a martial art expert in the Central Plains.”

The two boys were stupefied. Could it be that this woman-in-white was of different tribe from foreign country?

The woman-in-white suddenly stood up, her hand grabbed the hilt of her sword, she said in heavy voice, “Two little demons, operate the sail for me.”

The two boys were taken aback. “We don’t ...”

The woman-in-white impatiently said, “Even if you don’t know you have to do it. Come!”

Horried, the two boys looked up, only to see a figure coming down on them. At first the figure looked small, but it grew big quickly, like a big bird coming down on the fishing boat. The power was extremely astonishing.

The two boys instinctively threw themselves at the rudder. The man was flying about a zhang away from the small boat, a very strong and violent qi was pressing down on them.

The surrounding air suddenly turned cold, as if it was condensing to be ice. Cold air permeated everywhere. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's teeth were chattering, as they swayed from side to side.

Heavy gauze covered the woman-in-white's face, so that nobody could see her expression. But just like when she was dealing with Jiao Xie and his men, she maintained her carefree attitude, the clothes on her body fluttered everywhere, but she still did not look at Yuwen Huaji, who came down to them like descending devil or immortal.

The out-of-control sail, the attack of the river water, plus the stronger vortex due to Yuwen Huaji's fantastic Mysterious Ice Energy, made the boat tilt and spin, ready to capsize anytime.

'Ring!' the woman-in-white's sword left its sheathe, as she leaped upward.

The sword turned into millions strong tips, meeting Yuwen Huaji's attack head on. Right away the cold air was cut more than half. By the time Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling recovered from their earlier stupor, the battle between the two martial art experts had already begun.

Yuwen Huaji knew that if with one strike he could not hit his target, the boat would sail farther away; therefore, he put

everything he had in this one strike to generate maximum impact.

He was the most accomplished expert under Yuwen Shang, the Yuwen Clan Leader of one of the four most powerful clans. Even Shi Long, whose fame shook Yangzhou, lost his life under his hands. Therefore, his best shot was not a small matter at all.

‘Boom!’ Palm and sword’s energy collided.

Like flash of lightning or sparks of fire the woman-in-white’s sword stabbed twelve times. He also countered with twelve palm strikes.

The two combatants were sometimes engaged in close battle, another time they suddenly separated. Yuwen Huaji let out a fierce hiss. Borrowing the momentum he flitted across and flew toward a mud pier on the riverbank. The woman-in-white fell back onto the boat, she held her sword with the tip pointing at Yuwen Huaji.

When these two people fought, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt that the small fishing boat was sinking down, only when they stopped that the boat floated again. From this one could see clearly how powerful Yuwen Huaji’s palm was.

By this time one after another the other soldiers have arrived at the shore. It was only then did Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling realized

that their small fishing boat has been brought by the current to the shore downstream. Crying out in panic, they scrambled toward the rudder and desperately tried to control the boat.

The woman-in-white acted as if she was completely oblivious of everything else, her attention was focused solely on Yuwen Huaji, who, by this time, had landed on a large rock on the riverbank.

The fishing boat suddenly regained its balance. Coupled with favorable strong wind, the boat traversed diagonally toward the shore of the opposite bank. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling cheered in their shrill voice.

While they were feeling very proud of themselves, Yuwen Huaji's voice came across the water, "Such swordsmanship is rarely seen indeed. Miss, what relationship do you have with Gaoli's[2] Yi Jian Dashi [great master of peaceful sword] Fu Cailin?

With Kou Zhong on the helm and the full wind behind, the boat sailed upstream like an arrow.

The woman-in-white did not utter a single word in response to Yuwen Huaji's question, giving the impression that she was unfathomable.

Yuwen Huaji's voice was heard again, "Miss is protecting these two kids, it is really unwise. Yuwen Huaji will definitely ask to have

the benefit of your expertise again.”

The fishing boat was moving faster and faster away that over time they have left the enemy far behind. The woman-in-white was still standing on the bow, her clothes were fluttering in the wind. She did indeed look like a goddess from the world of the immortals.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had already regarded her as an immortal; they felt like they wanted to prostrate themselves in front of her and worship her.

Right this moment, the woman-in-white’s bamboo rain hat suddenly shattered, the pieces rained down on the deck, revealing the woman-in-white’s matchless elegance, but also the unrivalled paleness of her jade countenance. She let out a tender moan, threw up a mouthful of blood, and sat down dejectedly on the deck.

Shocked, the two boys rushed toward her. Kou Zhong barked, “You steer the boat! Let me help her!”

‘Bang!’ The woman-in-white suddenly sat up cross-legged; with one palm she pushed Kou Zhong back to the rudder.

“Don’t you dare touching me!” she hissed hoarsely. And then she closed her eyes.

The two boys stared blankly at the woman-in-white; they realized that although she managed to force Yuwen Huaji back, she had suffered a heavy injury.

Momentarily they were at a loss of what to do. The fishing boat sailed farther and farther away from Yangzhou city walls.

[2] Specifically, Gaoli refers to Korean Goryeo dynasty [918-1392], but generally, it refers to Korea, especially in context of art and culture.

Impossible To Unravel

Kou Zhong put his mouth next to Xu Ziling's ear and said in a very low voice, "This woman [orig. 'poniang', usually used derogatorily] is prettier than Auntie Hong of Spring Breeze Courtyard."

Xu Ziling was staring blankly at the woman-in-white's stately and elegant jade-countenance; hearing Kou Zhong, he nodded in approval. The woman-in-white, who was still sitting in meditation, suddenly opened her eyes and glowered at them.

The two boys were startled; they withdrew and huddled together, trying to get as far away from her as possible. The woman-in-white's delicate body suddenly shook violently, which forced her to close her eyes again.

It was quite some time later that she opened her eyes again. Casting an angry look at them, she asked in one breath, "Where are we?"

The two boys perfunctorily looked around both banks of

Yangtze River, and then shook their heads together.

The woman-in-white looked up to the sky trying to determine the time of day. Seeing the sun was about to set behind the mountain, and the banks of the Great River was bathed in the glow of the setting sun, she knew that she has been meditating four close to two sichen [1 sichen is equal to two hours]. After pondering for a moment, she asked in soft voice, “Why is Yuwen Huaji after you?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged glances, and then both of them shook their heads vigorously, “Don’t know!”

The woman-in-white’s eyes flashed with cold rays. After staring fiercely at the two boys, she suddenly burst into tender laughter and said, “I want you, two little demons, to jump into the river right now!”

The two boys were so hungry that their limbs did not have any strength; hearing her, their countenance turned pale with fright since they did not know what to do.

The woman-in-white suddenly sighed; she said unenthusiastically, “I want to sleep for three sichen, the two of you little demons must steer the boat nicely. If the boat capsizes, I will want your lives as compensation.”

Stars filled the whole sky, the moon was low on the horizon. In the dim moonlight, these two good friends, who depended on each other for survival, huddled together to keep themselves against the attack of hunger and of the river breeze, while their palm was pressed on the rudder.

The woman-in-white had her back toward them, as she sat facing the bow in meditation to heal her injury. She did look like a beautiful goddess idol carved from jade and stone. Her beautiful hair has been loosened by the wind, it fluttered freely in the breeze like a cloud.

Kou Zhong whispered as softly as he could in Xu Ziling's ear, "Do you think she can hear us?"

Xu Ziling was watching her as if he was in a trance, hence he did not hear him. "What did you say?" he blurted out.

Kou Zhong pinched his leg hard. He sighed and said, "I wonder what kind of fellow is that Yuwen Huaji, compared to this wo ... hey, this evil woman, he seems to be more formidable."

Horried, Xu Ziling looked at the woman-in-white's back. It was quite a moment later that he finally breathed a sigh of relief. Kou Zhong elbowed his arm and said in ecstasy, "She really can't hear."

Xu Ziling asked the question he has been dying to ask, “So the secret manual is really not damaged by the water?”

Kou Zhong reached out to fetch ‘The Secret to Long Life’ and flipped a few pages before handing it to Xu Ziling. “Why don’t you look at it yourself!” he said, “I’ve already told you that this is genuine goods at fair prices, a special treasure. Otherwise, why is that Yuwen Huagu so anxious to get it? Ha! That’s funny, the name Huagu [transforming bone] is a bit more-fitting than Huaji.” [hua – change into/transform, ji – and/to reach/up to/in time for. I don’t think it means anything.]

Xu Ziling turned the book back and forth a few times. “If it is waterproof,” he mused, “Chances are it might also be fireproof ... Ah!

With lightning speed Kou Zhong snatched the book back, he deftly hid the valuable and heavy treasure well, while muttering, “Don’t even think of testing it. Ha! We are finally leaving that stuffy, confining egg Yangzhou city. And now everything is fine. Except for our precious belly.”

Now that he mentioned it, suddenly Xu Ziling’s tummy reacted with an unhappy rumbling. “Do you think this beautiful evil woman would be willing to lend us some traveling expenses for us to treat our ailing belly? After all, her eyes have taken advantage of our best.”

Kou Zhong's eyes lit up because he spotted the small bundle lying by her side. He made some eye signals to Xu Ziling, and then started to crawl quietly toward the bundle. Naturally Xu Ziling knew that he was going to 'imitate the dog and steal chicken', to be a thief and to do some shady business. Quickly he grabbed Kou Zhong's ankle while shaking his head vigorously with a firm expression on his face.

Kou Zhong struggled twice, yet he was unable to break free. Dejected, he sat back down by Xu Ziling's side and said sadly, "If Zhong Shaoye turns into a hungry ghost, I will definitely come to you, the other hungry ghost, to settle the account."

Xu Ziling said, "Don't forget that we are heroes. Right now we are rushing together on a meteoric rise [orig. divine steed flashes past] on a highway to the abundant enterprise of Duke, Marquis, General and Prime Minister. Making such a move against a weak and unsuspecting woman like this will really bring harm to our good reputation as Yangzhou's two dragons; not to mention she did after all save our lives."

Kou Zhong surrendered. "This evil woman's skill can't be considered bad," he said, "But she is a weak and unsuspecting woman. Oh! Why does it have to rain now?"

They both looked up to the sky, and saw black clouds rolling in fast. Very quickly the moon and the stars disappeared, followed

by heavy rain pouring down. In no time at all the tranquil river turned into a wildly turbulent one. The Great River was pitched black, they could not even see the fingers in front of their nose, let alone the woman-in-white. Therefore, they could forget about steering the boat in such a difficult situation.

The fishing boat was tossed around endlessly by the river; they were surrounded by vast darkness. The rain shot down like arrows. Their clothes were completely drenched, making them cold and miserable.

In their frantic struggle, 'Boom!' the fishing boat suddenly hit something, immediately it leaned sideways and capsized. They both cried out in alarm and threw themselves in the direction of the woman-in-white.

With its earth-shattering power [orig. hiding the sky and covering the earth], the river water swoop down on them. The three people held on to each other and sank down together into the river.

In this situation, where the violent storm blew the rain horizontally, where the waves surged rapidly, where the turbulent water prevented them from seeing their own fingers, where Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were starving and freezing, where they were attacked relentlessly by the water, every time they struggled hard to surface, they would immediately be pulled

down into the water again.

The two boys' original intention was to rescue the woman-in-white, but in the end Xu Ziling was holding on to her neck, while Kou Zhong was pulling her legs. The woman-in-white was still in deep sleep, but her body was perfectly straight; no matter how hard the wind and the rain attacked her, she stayed floating face up on the river. In a way, she has become the two little demons' life-saving raft.

They were struggling between being living persons versus being water ghosts for nobody knows how long. The power of the rain finally lessened. The moon also showed its face a little. It was only then did they realize that the water has washed them out closer to the shore. In their great delight they exerted the strength that they did not know they still had, to pull the woman-in-white along to the shore.

As soon as they reached the muddy shore, the two boys were not able to hold on anymore; they lay down on the sand on either side of the woman-in-white.

The river still sent its waves to the shore, but no longer with the violent force of a moment ago. The two boys could not stop panting, in contrast to the woman-in-white soft and slow breathing, as if she was sleeping soundly.

The moon was obscured by drifting clouds once again. Before the three people were shrouded by the darkness, light suddenly came from the direction of the lower reaches of the river. The two boys forced themselves to look up, and were shocked to see six big, brightly lit five-mast warships, with all their sails down, sailing at full speed toward them.

They were so scared that their scalps felt numb. Quickly they crouched as low as possible behind a sandbar. In time like this they really wish the river tide would be a bit more violent.

Time seemed to stop to a standstill.

While in their hearts Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling beseeched all gods and Buddhas, known or unknown to them, the huge warships finally sailed far away. Fortunately the ships were so tall that their lights barely reached the darkness where the three of them were lying down, plus at that time the sky was still filled with drizzle, so the visibility was low, plus lantern lights could not reach far; hence the three of them escaped great calamity.

With the woman-in-white between their hands and feet, the two boys huffed and puffed to get her onto the grassy area farther up the shore, and then both of them dropped down, totally exhausted.

Xu Ziling was the first to suffer a dizzy spell, he could not hold

on, his vision blackened and he blacked out. Kou Zhong called him twice. And then after feeling his back to make sure the 'secret manual' was safe, he felt relieved and closed his eyes to sleep.

After sleeping for nobody knows how long, Kou Zhong was the first to wake up. He saw the sun was shining on the open space around him, his body felt comfortably warm, the heat seemed to penetrate his body and soul. Moaning in comfort, for a moment he felt as if he was still in his little nest in Yangzhou. It was not until he heard the rumbling noise of the river beneath his feet did he finally remembered what had happened the previous day. He woke up with a jolt, opened his eyes wide, and sat up.

The place where they were was surrounded by range of hills, the sun had already at the top of the hills, the Great River was flowing from the south, flowing right next to them.

After looking more clearly, he could not help sucking a breath of cold air. Turned out in this section of the river the rapid water merged with rugged shoal, reefs stood up everywhere; no wonder that although he tried to steer it, their boat suddenly crashed and sank.

But it was a good accident; if not for their boat capsized, perhaps Yuwen 'Huagu's ships would have caught up with them early on.

Xu Ziling was still sleeping like a dead person.

Heavens! Where is that woman-in-white?

Kou Zhong was at a loss, but he was also being paranoid; he was afraid she might slip back into the river. Quickly he crawled toward Xu Ziling and slapped his face in his usual technique. “Xiao Ling! Xiao Ling! Wake up! That evil woman is gone.”

Xu Ziling struggled hard to open his eyes, but unable to withstand the harsh sunlight, he closed his eyes immediately. “Ay,” he moaned, “I was just dreaming of Zhen Sao’s delicious meat and vegetable steamed buns! What? That evil woman slipped away?” Suddenly he sat up and glanced to the left and looked to the right with a look of disappointment on his face.

Kou Zhong burst into laughter, “Xiao Ling!” he said, “You fell in love with that woman, didn’t you? Be careful, I think she might want to take your little life. Hey! Ha ha! Ow! Ay! You are not supposed to laugh on an empty stomach.”

Xu Ziling shot him an angry glare, “I am just afraid she slipped away for personal gain, taking along our secret manual with her!”

Startled, Kou Zhong felt his back. Suddenly he sprang up, his countenance changed. “Stinky woman, mother thief, she really stole our secret manual!”

Xu Ziling still thought he was joking; reaching out to feel Kou Zhong's back and lower waist, he let out a miserable scream and threw himself to the ground. Spreading out his hands and feet, he sobbed, "It's finished! The person is gone, the money is gone, the secret manual is gone, and we have become fugitives. O God! Everything is finished."

Gnashing his teeth, Kou Zhong stood up, made a fist toward the heavens and shouted madly, "No! I will do whatever it takes to get the secret manual back! Ah ...!" Something flew across and hit his face. Kou Zhong screamed miserably and tumbled down to the ground.

Xu Ziling sat up, aghast. He saw standing on a rock about a zhang away, was the woman-in-white. Her beautiful face looked as if it was covered in a layer of cold frost; with her apricot eyes opened wide, she glowered at them.

When Kou Zhong was struggling to crawl up, he discovered that the 'secret projectile' that attacked him was precisely the darling of their hearts, their life treasure. With a strange cry he returned the book inside his clothes on his back. His manner of regarding the book as important as his life was ridiculously funny.

With a cold snort the woman-in-white said, "What martial art secret manual? Don't make people laugh until they die. Just by looking at those seven diagrams, I know that it's a plaything about

training to reach immortality that the Taoists use to cheat people. Those talisman scribbling are to make it deliberately mystifying. Only Yuwen Huaji and you, the two ignorant children, consider it a treasure.”

Greatly delighted, Kou Zhong said, “It is best that Dashi is thinking that way. Hee hee ...! Last night we finally managed to save Dashi’s life. Although there’s a saying, ‘confer a favor do not expect recompense’, slight reward is always one’s duty under the circumstances. Is it possible for Dashi to give us a couple of coin strings? And then everybody may peacefully take different roads and urge the horses on. Good beginning and good end.”

‘Pow!’ Once again Kou Zhong tumbled down to the ground. Five clear finger marks appeared on his face. Of course it was the woman-in-white who sent him a slap through the air.

The woman-in-white ignored Kou Zhong’s cry of pain; she turned her eyes on Xu Ziling. Xu Ziling raised his hands to show his innocence.

“I didn’t say anything,” he said, “Could you not stare at Zaixia [lit. under, a humble way to call oneself. I think only Jianghu people used this, I’ve never seen usage among ordinary/common citizens.] like that?”

“You didn’t say anything?” the woman-in-white indifferently

said, “Then who said just now that I slipped away taking your rotten book along?”

Xu Ziling scooted several cun [1 cun is approx. an inch/a thumb] backward, while putting up a big smile on his face, “It was just a misunderstanding! And now the misunderstanding has been dispelled, let the bygone be bygone.”

By this time Kou Zhong has crawled back up; while stroking his burning cheek, he nodded incessantly and said, “Right! Right! There’s no more misunderstanding, we all are still good friends.”

The woman-in-white cast him a sidelong glance; she said in disdain, “You little demon, who do you think you are that you are fit to bargain with your Miss? I only wanted to look at your stinking book with weird scribbling, that’s why I took it. Alright, I want each of you to give yourself ten heavy slaps on your mouth; let’s see if after this you still dare to call me ‘woman, woman’?” [See the beginning of this chapter.]

The two boys looked at each other. Xu Ziling suddenly stood up straight with indignant look on his face. “A warrior can be killed, must not be humiliated,” he said firmly, “You can kill me!”

Kou Zhong got a shock. “Xiao Ling!” he said, “We can discuss everything slowly.” Turning toward the woman-in-white, he said, “My Dashi Miss, after we slap ourselves, will we go our own ways,

from now on all gratitude and grudges, kindness and enmity, will be severed, both parties won't have anything to do with each other anymore?"

The woman-in-white's cold eyes flashed with thick killing aura; she said coldly, "I changed my mind. One of you must take my sword. The two of you may decide for yourself, which one will die."

The two boys looked at each other, and then they exclaimed together, "Me!"

'Ring!' The woman-in-white unsheathed her treasured sword.

The two boys exchanged glances again, and then they screamed together, turned around and ran toward the river. But before they could even take two steps, the clothes on their back tightened, because the woman-in-white picked them up like a couple of chicken. The wind swished by the two boys' ears. They left the riverbank, but not toward the plain or the forest lining up both sides of the rivers for hundreds of li.

'Bang! Bang!' The two were dropped down one after another from about a zhang away, along a hard surface on inclined slope. Because of their own momentum, they rolled down the slope seven, eight times, before finally landed on the bottom, totally confused, and with all four limbs facing the sky.

They had been hungry for a day and a night, their limbs had been devoid of strength early on, it was with great difficulty that they were finally able to crawl up. Looking around, they found out that they were actually at the entrance of a small town. People were walking around, the place was buzzing with activity, it was a lively town, but the woman-in-white was nowhere to be seen.

Kpu Zhong was greatly delighted, “That wo ... ha! Dashi has left.”

Licking his lips, Xu Ziling said, “How can we find something to eat?”

Kou Zhong slapped his chest, assuming an upright and unafraid stance. Walking away from the wilderness, he took the ancient road leading to the entrance of the town, and went straight into the marketplace.

Xu Ziling ran after him. He saw the signboard above the city gate had three big characters ‘Bei Po Xian’ [lit. north slope county] written on it. “I wonder if they have militia army in here,” he said hopefully.

Kou Zhong snapped, “When our tummy is rumbling, even Emperor or Laozi[1] will have to step aside.”

By this time the two boys have reached the main street, which was lined on both sides with houses, shops, and inns and restaurants. When the people saw their shabby clothes and unkempt hair, they raised their eyebrows and cast a despising look on them. They were accustomed to this kind of look; therefore, they did not think differently.

Walking about a dozen zhang, a sweet smelling of food assaulted their nostrils. The two boys could not stop their feet from stepping toward the direction of the smell. There was a small lane crossing the main street, turning to the left, they saw spiraling smoke from kitchen chimneys rose to the air; they were wondering which house was producing such a fragrant smell.

They had just decided to go in and take a chance when a shout coming from behind them; evidently someone was calling out to them, "Stop!"

The two of them turned around in shock, only to see two official looking men, with devils and monsters' appearance, were coming toward them. From their expression, it was clear that their intention was not good.

Seeing they were not Yuwen Huaji or his men, Kou Zhong was relieved. Taking the initiative, he stepped forward, raised his cupped fist and said, "Finally seeing Uncle Officers, this is very good indeed."

The two officers were taken aback. The one that looked a bit older asked in surprise, “Why is seeing us good?”

Kou Zhong’s eyes turned red, as he narrated his sad story, “We, two brothers, are Daxing [district, in Beijing] people, My name is Yuwen Zhong, his is Yuwen Ling. We embarked a ship to Yangzhou, who would have thought that en route we were attacked by rebels? The boat capsized, the people perished, more than a thousand entourage were buried at the bottom of the river, only us, two brothers escaped with our lives, but we lost our way. The purpose of our trip to Yangzhou this time is to visit our uncle, the Zongguan of Yangzhou, Uncle Yuchi. Ay!”

Listening to him, the two officers looked at each other. One of them asked suspiciously, “Where exactly did the mishap happen? How did you arrive here?”

Xu Ziling caught on, “The accident happened at the Grand Canal[2]. To evade the thieves, we were in panic and did not see where we were going; it was after walking for many days that we are finally here. I wonder what are Uncles’ honored surname and great given name? If you could send us off to Yangzhou, Uncle Yuchi will definitely reward you handsomely.”

The older officer replied, “My name is Zhou Ping, and he is Chen Wang.”

Noticing that the two officers were eyeing their shabby clothes that made them look more like beggars than young masters of prominent family, Kou Zhong promptly offered a remedy, “During our journey over the mountains and across the forests, our clothes were ripped and damaged beyond repair, fortunately we came across a small village, where we exchanged our jade ornaments for two sets of clothing, but we were given random direction that we ended up in here. May I ask Uncles, how much farther is it from here to Yangzhou?”

Chen Wang and Zhou Ping exchanged glances; their eyes lit up simultaneously. Zhou Ping let out a dry cough; his mannerism suddenly became a lot more respectful. In a low voice and less air he asked, “May we ask which one is your esteemed father?”

With a straight face Kou Zhong replied, “My father is Yuwen Huagu, my father’s younger brother is Yuwen Huaji. Ay! Father has never been good in martial art matters, he made us, two brothers, to work hard on the teaching of Confucius and Mencius. Every day we have to read some ‘first concern is affairs of state, enjoying the pleasure comes later’[3]. Otherwise, if we only learned one-tenth of our Uncle’s martial art skill, we won’t be in such a sorry state today.”

Zhou Ping and Chen Wang were two straw bags. Hearing him quoting some literature, although they did not understand, plus they were intimidated by Yuwen Huaji’s prestige, their suspicion vanished. Hurriedly they fell on their knees and loudly expressed

their respect.

Kou Zhong was delighted. He said with a laugh, “Two great uncles need not be overly-courteous. I wonder which restaurant nearby has quite decent dishes?”

Zhou Ping respectfully said, “Two Gongzi [young master], please follow lowly ones! Our town’s Gao Peng Xuan [gao peng – high/respected friend, xuan – pavilion with a view], although it is local, its appetizer is exceptionally well-known.”

Chen Wang turned around and said, “I must report to County Deputy Chen immediately that Yuwen Daren’s [lit. big/great man, a term of respect toward superiors, usually government officials] nephews have arrived.”

The two boys jumped in fright, but their stomachs were rumbling violently, so they did not care too much about other things.

[1] Lao-tze (c. 500 BC), Chinese philosopher, the founder of Taoism.

[2] Da Yunhe, the Grand Canal, 1800km from Beijing to Hangzhou, built starting from 486BC.

[3] Quotation from essay 'On Yueyang Tower', by Song Dynasty writer Fan Zhongyan; ergo, it was in the future since this story supposedly happened before Tang Dynasty.

Thunder In A Clear Blue Sky

When Kou Zhong woke up the next morning, the sky had not yet brightened. Recalling that the previous day using silver tongue and flowery words they were able to swindle food and a place to stay, even the County Lord was regarding them as honored guest, he was feeling extremely proud of himself.

As he opened his eyes, he found out that Xu Ziling, who was sleeping next to him, had already had his eyes open; half sitting and half reclining, supporting his head with both hands on the pillow, staring at the top of the mosquito net above them, looking like he was lost in thought.

Worried that he had nobody to share his glory, Kou Zhong sat up in excitement and said, "Xiao Ling, did you see it? In Yangzhou we were beggars and ruffians, but as soon as we left Yangzhou city walls, we became big shot young masters. In all our life, this is the first time we ever slept on such a comfortable bed, hugging delicious quilt and having sweet dreams. Taking off and putting on clothes we have young beauties waiting upon us. Ah! Having that sister Xiao Juan's small hands rubbing my body, I already feel like becoming the Prime Minister."

Unconcerned, Xu Ziling said, "If you can't think of a way to escape, we will be sent back to Yangzhou. That would be awesome indeed."

Kou Zhong laughed quietly and said, "Set your twelve thousand hearts at ease. After we have our stomach full, we'll come back here to pick up some good souvenirs, and then find any excuse, for example, we want to go sightseeing around town or something like that. Once we are out of town, won't it be easy to escape?"

Xu Ziling knew Kou Zhong was full of craft and cunning, so he was not really

worried. He only sighed without saying anything.

“You did not sleep well last night?” Kou Zhong wondered, “Why are you up so early?”

Xu Ziling was not in good mood, “We went to bed right after dinner last night, didn’t we have enough sleep already?”

“What is it then?” Kou Zhong pressed on, “Hey! You are not thinking about that evil woman, are you?”

Evidently he had revealed the load in Xu Ziling’s mind, since he stayed silent. Kou Zhong scooted over and held his shoulders as he said, “One world two brother. Xiao Ling, are you in love with her?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Xu Ziling said, “Just go to your mother. Based on her age, she is at least half my mother. Besides, just like she said, we don’t have qualifications to have any discussion with her. I was just wondering, you, this muddle-headed fellow, have always loved to look at pretty women. This woman is more beautiful than any women we have ever seen so far. Why did you always try to push her away? On the surface she appears fierce, but her treatment to us is really not bad. Otherwise she would not have sent us to the city gate.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “I am merely thinking about our future outlook. Precisely because this woman’s beauty is difficult to deal with, plus we have had intimate contact with her, that’s why we must especially guard against her. Men of character attach most importance to their exploits, especially since we have not achieve it yet, we must abstain from infatuation of beauty, to such an extent as to dampen our magnificent aspiration ... Hey! Why are you laughing ...? Ha ...”

While they were talking and joking, the sky had brightened. They heard a muffled noise of the maids and servants sweeping and moving about outside.

Kou Zhong rubbed his still unbearably sore legs. “Let me swindle horses from County Deputy Chen later, I’ll say that we want stroll around on horseback. That way when we slip away later we can do it a bit faster, plus we could have substitute for the curse on our, Prime Minister and Great General’s legs.”

With a bitter laugh Xu Ziling asked, “Do you know how to ride a horse?”

“What’s so hard about it?” Kou Zhong proudly replied, “Just climb onto the saddle, turn the horse’s head to the right direction, and strike his mother’s butt twice, won’t that be enough?”

Xu Ziling was about to reply when, ‘bang, bang, bang!’ there was a knock on the door. Kou Zhong thought it was that good looking sister Xiao Juan; he coughed once, and said, “Come in!”

As soon as the gate opened, like a tornado the short and fat County Deputy Chen burst in. Reaching the two boys’ bed, he saluted in a flurry and said, “It’s good that two Da Shaoye [big young masters] are awake. Last night subordinate officer received news that your respected uncle Yuwen Daren [see Chapter 4] has dispatched people everywhere to find out the two Da Shaoye’s whereabouts. That very night I sent fast courier to get in contact with Yuwen Daren. He might arrive any moment. When two Da Shaoye see your respected uncle, please do not forget to say a few good words on subordinate officer’s behalf.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt as if they had just been thrown down from the world of the immortals to the eighteenth layer of hell. Immediately their hands and feet turned icy-cold, their souls had just left their bodies.

County Deputy Chen thought that they were dumbstruck from extreme joy; he bowed respectfully with clasped hands and said, “I have instructed the servants to serve the two Gongzi [young master] taking a bath and changing clothes. Subordinate officer will wait in the main hall for two Gongzi to have breakfast together. Please excuse subordinate officer for now.”

He had just left the room, four young servants, including Xiao Juan, came in. They served them with great care, much more ceremonious and attentive compared to the previous night.

Most annoying was Zhou Ping and Chen Wang also came; eagerly attentive, they waited on the side, telling them that the breakfast was ready. Therefore,

they did not have any opportunity to slip out.

During breakfast with County Deputy Chen, the situation was even more desperately serious; more than a dozen yamen [government office in old China] officers stood on both sides to serve them. The two boys ate with anxiety [orig. heart alarmed, guts tremble] and were unbearably uncomfortable.

It was not until Xu Ziling kicked his leg under the table that Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “I wonder if there are any historical sites and scenic spots around this town. While my Uncle is not here yet, we want to take this opportunity to enjoy sightseeing and having fun, so that we won’t come here in vain.”

County Deputy Chen wrinkled his face [orig. five sense organs: nose, eyes, lips, tongue, ears], showing an extremely unsightly countenance. Smiling apologetically he said, “For the past few years robbers spring up everywhere, it is not appropriate for the two Da Shaoye to go out of town; else something bad happened, then how would our county take the responsibility?”

Kou Zhong wished he could pinch him dead, but of course his face showed that he gladly accepted the suggestion. “Xian Daren [lit. county officer] is indeed very thoughtful,” he said, “Hey! Xian Daren’s kindness to us, we, two brothers, will definitely report to Uncle as things really are, so that he could evaluate the merit and bestow reward accordingly. It’s just that what we, two brothers, fear the most is staying idle inside. How about this: is there any fine courtyard or first class brothel where we can seek pleasure? Ay, ever since leaving Dadu [old name of Beijing, lit. great capital], we have not ... Hey! Xian Daren should know what we are talking about. Originally we thought that as soon as we reach Yangzhou, we could have a bit of fun. Now that we have slept well, we are full of energy and in high spirit; no matter what, we must go ... Ha ... this kind of trivial matter, naturally we must not bother Xian Daren.”

From behind, Zhou Ping said, “But I am afraid the ladies in the courtyard are not even out of bed yet.”

County Deputy Chen barked, “Then you tell them to get out of bed!” But when he turned to face Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, his face was all smile, as he knowingly said, “This is a trivial matter, subordinate officer will arrange everything.”

Turning to Zhou Ping again he barked, "Why haven't you left to make necessary arrangement?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged glances; both speculated that if they could not seize the opportunity while they were at the pleasure house to escape, most probably they could just kiss their prospect and their precious little lives goodbye.

The two boys sat inside the carriage, accompanied personally by County Deputy Chen, on their way to the county's most upscale pleasure house.

Beipo County could be considered the biggest county around Yangzhou. In term of liveliness, it was not too far inferior to Yangzhou. Because the county fell under Jiangdu's jurisdiction, plus it had direct export channel, the handicraft industry was particularly flourishing.

Too bad that the two boys' heart was loaded with concern over their little lives, so that although County Deputy Chen talked until his spittle flew everywhere, promoting his own county's benevolent government and giving running commentary on everything they saw along the road, none of these even registered in their minds. They simply agreed thoughtlessly.

Especially when they saw the dozen or so officers urging their horses to protect in front and behind them, they felt that they were not much different to the prisoners being escorted to the execution ground.

Actually, Kou Zhong, who has always been quick-witted, has already had a plan. He thought that if they could hide inside the room with the pleasure house lady, then they would have a chance to evade these people's eyes. But whether they would be successful in escaping, it was still unknown; hence the reason they were still secretly worried.

The biggest threat would be Yuwen Huaji, who could arrive anytime, and reveal their true color, and then not only they would be humiliated, they could lose their lives as well. This kind of helpless feeling really did not need to be mentioned.

Every time County Deputy Chen looked out the window, the two boys immediately signaled each other, using their usual method to discuss escape plan.

The carriage made a grand entrance into the courtyard. The two fake young masters followed County Deputy Chen stepping down from the carriage, and were greeted by a few bleary eyed and averaged-looking prostitutes, under the leadership of the brothel proprietress. As the two boys looked at each other with wry smile on their faces, suddenly the sound of hoof beats was hear from afar, but coming toward them, fast.

The Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling pair, which was hard to differentiate which one was the older and which one was the younger, knew that their situation was going from bad to worse. While they were thinking of how to stake everything they had and flee for their lives, a strong gust of wind arrived, pressing down from above.

County Deputy Chen and his bailiffs still did not know what was going on, one after another they were thrown out in all directions. In the confusion they seemed to see a white shadow descending from the sky. But by the time they were able to crawl up, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had already disappeared without a trace, leaving only swirling dust that was still hanging in the air.

The woman-in-white grabbed the two boys by their wide belts as they flew over houses and climbed over the ridges of the roof. In a flash they had left Beipo County but kept speeding over the mountain and fields, as effortless as blowing dust.

The two boys felt as if they had just come back from death's door, they almost could not refrain from cheering, but were afraid they might provoke the woman-in-white; hence they had to keep silent.

Shortly afterwards they arrived at the riverbank. They saw mooring on the piers were numerous boats, and on both sides of the river several fishermen were busy mending their nets.

Without even thinking the woman-in-white got into one of the boats and

tossed the two boys on the deck. With her sword she cut the mooring rope, and then she grabbed the oar and vigorously started to row, splashing water everywhere. The boat glided on the water like an arrow, leaving the angry shouts of pursuing fishermen far behind.

Tossed by the woman-in-white, the two boys were aching all over; whining and groaning they sat up. You look at me I look at you, they saw the frosty face of the woman-in-white; how could they dare to speak? The atmosphere was extremely terrifying.

After traveling for at least twenty, thirty li, the woman-in-white let out a cold snort and reduced the speed of the boat. Gathering up his courage, Kou Zhong tried to sound her out, “Dashi, you must have followed us all this time; otherwise, how could you arrive at the nick of time?”

The woman-in-white did not even look at them; she said angrily, “Who have time to follow you, two little demons who only know how to steal and swindle? It’s just that noticing Yuwen Huaji is sending people to search nearby towns and villages, I came back for you.”

Xu Ziling respectfully said, “Thank you very much for Dashi’s kindness in saving our lives. If we have the opportunity, we, two brothers, will definitely repay Dashi.”

The woman-in-white condescendingly said, “I did not do it out of the kindness of my heart. It’s just that if I can make Yuwen Huaji not happy, I’ll do it in a heartbeat. So there is no need to thank me. When we arrive at Danyang, we will go our separate ways, and henceforth I forbid you to even mention me. Or else I will come and chop your little doggies’ head.”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Go our separate ways then we go our separate ways. If in the future we master an unrivalled martial art skill, I want to see if you still dare to call us ‘little doggy this, little doggy that’.”

The woman-in-white’s eyes flashed in anger, but then she softened. When she spoke up, there was no trace of anger in her voice. “Even if you do obeisance and enter Turkic people’s ‘Wu Zun’ [Revered Martial Art] Bi Xuan [lit. complete

mystery] school, don't even think that you would achieve any considerable skill. Therefore, it would be best if you forget this dream of yours. Go learn a good craftsmanship, make your living, take a wife, have children, and enjoy your life to the fullest. That will be the most decent thing to do."

Hearing this, the two boys were deeply hurt. After staring blankly at her for a while, Xu Ziling could not help asking, "Are you saying that our innate ability is too lacking?"

The woman-in-white sighed. She looked down at the two boys tenderly, and then with an unusually gentle voice she said, "You must have realized that you are not even qualified to have me lying to you. Your natural endowment is actually better than most people I've ever seen. Take last night for example, after being tossed around like that you did not get sick, it is indeed hard to come by. But you do lack the good fortune."

Receiving her compliment, the two boys' self-esteem and confidence was somewhat restored. "What good fortune?" they asked at the same time.

While still rowing, the woman-in-white replied, "It's the good fortune of training. All who wish to excel above the masses and become martial art expert must start their training since childhood. According to my Shifu, anybody who wants to learn anything until achieving the 'what the heart wishes, the hand accomplishes' level, the most important period is the ten years between the age of five until fifteen. Just like learning language; if one starts to learn after this period, no matter what the pronunciation will not be just right. [Translator's note: the term here refers to the pronunciation of Chinese characters.] Martial art is also the same. Supposing you start today, no matter how hard you work, you will spend twice the effort to get half the result. If you only learn enough skill to run errands, sooner or later you will be killed. In that case, it will be better if you did not learn at all. Do you understand?"

The two boys stared blankly at her. They felt their hands and feet icy-cold; their world seemed to lose its life force and meaning. Kou Zhong has always had unyielding nature; he patted the treasured book behind his back and loudly said, "Maybe we are an exception? Furthermore, we still have the secret manual. Don't you think our case is a bit different?"

For the first time the woman-in-white's eyes showed pity. Shaking her head, she said, "The truth is always hard to accept. The book you have, I've already looked. It is called 'The Secret to Long Life'. It is indeed a treasury of the Taoists, but it has nothing to do with martial art. You'd better find a place where you can throw it away. Otherwise, you may face disaster because of it. Ay, in my opinion, that book is just a lie; how could human beings can achieve immortality?"

The two boys' countenance was immediately devoid of any color; they were unable to speak. The boat was filled with awkward silence.

Danyang was the biggest town in the upper reaches of Yangzhou; it was the route that has to be taken if one was to go from the inland out to sea via Yangzhou. In importance, it was second only to Yangzhou. The only thing it lacked was, of course, the Grand Canal that linked the north and the south.

The scenery inside the city was unique; the river weaved through it, adorned with hundreds of stone arch bridges over the river course. People built their lives around the water; high and low, row upon row of houses strewn at random. Where there was water there was street, where there was water there was market, where there was water there was road. Water, road, bridge, building, mixed into one entity, into one tranquil, pristine water scenery; tender and soft was water.

By early morning the next day, when the city gate opened, the woman-in-white, along with Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, mingled into the throng of peasants and villagers to sneak into the city. Because their dream of the future was shattered, their enthusiasm was dampened, they just followed the woman-in-white like a pair of walking corpses wandering around the city.

Obviously it was the first time the woman-in-white came here, her clear eyes looked around, seemingly interested in everything.

Upon entering the gate, they followed the main street going deep into the city; both sides of the street were lined with shops that people used as a place of business at the front, and as residence at the rear. The shop fronts were open, bright with the light from sunroof, and filled with all kinds of goods and arts and crafts products; it was extremely flourishing. The number of visitors was not a few either; it could even be said that the customers crowded these shops like a

cloud.

Everywhere the woman-in-white went, due to her beauty, both men and women gave her admiring look, but she did not seem to care, as if all of these were to be expected, as if she turned a blind eye to it.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling have not eaten for half a day and one full night. Although they were not in a good mood, they still had to fight the feeling of the empty stomach; while the woman-in-white did not even seem to notice they were passing many restaurants already, she simply walked straight ahead. Kou Zhong could not help coming over to her, coughed lightly, and said, “Shouldn’t we pay a visit to the temple of five viscera first?” [Translator’s note: I guess it’s a slang to refer to eating. Five viscera: heart, liver, spleen, lungs, kidneys.]

The woman-in-white halted her steps in front of a big building with white-washed wall and black roof tiles. “Do you have money?” she coldly asked.

From the other side Xu Ziling forced a laugh and said, “Naturally we don’t have any money. But Dashi, if you have some, won’t that be the same?”

With a cold laugh the woman-in-white said, “So if I have money than it would be the same as you have money? Have you looked into the mirror recently? Besides, my money, along with my bundle, has long ago fallen into the bottom of the river when you, two little demons, crashed the boat and capsized it. Yesterday you had people serving you two meals, you had ample food and clothing, while I haven’t had even half mantou [steamed roll] to eat. And now you are still blaming me for not taking you for a big feast?”

Kou Zhong was indignant. “Are you angry with us?” he said, “If our boat did not capsize, Yuwen Huagu would have catch up with us early on. At best we would be turned into bones by him [Translator’s note: play of words, gu hua, gu – bone, hua – transform]; but Dashi has countenance of flower, face like the moon. I guarantee that you will be taken as a concubine by that strange Yuwen fellow.”

The woman-in-white stopped abruptly. The two boys thought she was going to make things difficult for them; they were ready to run to two different

directions. The woman-in-white was taken aback; looking at the two boys' scared expression, she could not stop an amused look from appearing on her face for the first time.

And then when she saw the boys' stunned expression, she really smiled and said, "You two little demons, wait here for a moment, let me get some silver, and then I'll take you to a nice meal. Afterwards all kindness and benevolence will cease, we'll have nothing to do with each other." When she spoke the last two sentences, she was imitating Kou Zhong's style; she broke into laughter and walked toward a shop on the left.

Kou Zhong looked up and found out that it was actually a pawnshop. He quickly blocked her and said solemnly, "Pawning stuff? Nobody is more adept than me."

The woman-in-white was unhappy, "How do I know you won't stuff your pocket first?"

Having his real intention revealed by her, Kou Zhong could only sigh and dejectedly stepped back by Xu Ziling's side.

Following the woman-in-white entering the pawnshop with his gaze, Xu Ziling blurted out, "Since our dream of becoming the number one martial artist in the world is finished, looks like we don't have any choice but to focus on studying for the imperial examination. And then you can become the Right Premier, and I can become Left Premier."

With a wry smile Kou Zhong said, "While the world is in chaos, the one without prospect the most is precisely a rotten ghost scholar. But I still don't believe her mother's opinion that 'The Secret to Long Life' is completely unrelated to martial art. Although there is no Taoist priest who achieves immortality, we can see highly skilled Taoist priests on the street. From this we can clearly see that even though we cannot train to be immortal, we can still train to have exceptional martial art skill."

Xu Ziling stood up excitedly, but then he sighed and said, "But didn't that woman say that we missed the precious childhood to start training?"

Kou Zhong said, "I think she could see that our bones are much better than hers; afraid that in the future we can surpass her head, she intentionally spoke some discouraging words so that we will lose heart. Ay ..." Evidently he also felt that by what he said he was just deceiving himself; hence he did not continue.

In the meantime, the woman-in-white walked out in high spirits. The two boys hurriedly came over to her. The woman-in-white said in a low voice, "Listen up, you two little demons, if I hear you call me behind my back 'this woman' or 'that woman', I will cut off both of you, little doggies." [Reminder: the word 'woman' (po niang) is usually used derogatorily.]

The two boys were deeply embarrassed; they could only nodded and said yes repeatedly.

The three people climbed onto the second floor of a restaurant, sat on a table facing the window, and ordered some vegetable and meat dishes.

There were more than a dozen tables, half were filled with diners. On one table, there was a respectable-looking young man wearing luxurious clothing; one look and others could see that he was the son of a prominent family. He repeatedly cast a glance toward the woman-in-white; apparently he was mesmerized by her beauty.

Xu Ziling let out a dry cough, "May we venture to ask Dashi's honorable surname and great given name, so that we can address you properly?"

The woman-in-white propped her chin with one hand; she asked in surprise, "The two of you little demons are no more than Yangzhou's little ruffians, little gangsters; why is it that when you talk you always talk like you are old and full of experience, pretending like you are a pair of impoverished bookish students?"

Kou Zhong proudly replied, "This is called the person is poor, the ambition is not lacking. There will come a day we will become a pinnacle of virtue and ability; I want to see if you still dare to call us good-for-nothing."

The woman-in-white was in an unusually good temper; she thought for a

moment, and then said, "After I leave, what are you going to do? Cheating for your food and drink has never been an option."

It was the first time that Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt that the woman-in-white really cared about them, but at this moment the vegetables and meat dishes arrived, the two boys did not have time to think further. They leaned forward on the table and gorged themselves without any care of the world. It was actually very unsightly.

The woman-in-white only ate two mantou, and already stopped eating. She seemed to have something in her mind; she looked out the window without saying anything.

When the two boys could not eat anymore, the dishes on the table have been swept clean, nothing remained. The two boys rubbed their belly and could not help but looking at the woman-in-white.

The woman-in-white sighed. She took out more than ten taels of fine silver and put it on the table in front of the two boys. She said softly, "Thinking about the trials and tribulations ahead, I am giving this money to you. Although right now there is confusion of war [orig. fire beacons in all four directions] everywhere, the South is still comparably peaceful. However, this peace won't last long, it will be dangerous later. It's not advisable for you to stay long. You two must behave."

Ignoring the two boys' lit up eyes, she stared hard at the money on the table, and then she beckoned the waiter to settle the check.

The waiter respectfully said, "Miss' account has already been settled by the Gongzi that was sitting on the table over there. They have just left."

'Slam!' The woman-in-white took out a string of five zhu coins [1 zhu is 1/24 of a tael] and tossed it on the table. She said indignantly, "I don't want anybody else pay my bills, take it!"

She rose up and went down the stairs without saying anything.

The two boys saw how she decidedly left without looking back; since they already felt inferior and at a loss, after exchanging a glance, Kou Zhong sighed, picked up the silver and put it in his bosom, and dejectedly said, "Let's also go!"

Xu Ziling had also wanted to leave this heart-breaking place as soon as possible; hence he scampered behind Kou Zhong going down the stairs.

When they reached the street, they saw the sun was shining bright, people came and people went, but there was not a shred of warmth in these two boys' heart. When they were in Yangzhou, although life was hard, and often times they had to receive beatings and scolding from others, but they always had full hopes of the future.

Although now they were free, plus there was a small fortune in their pocket, they felt emptiness in their hearts instead. It was as though the world was so big, but there was nowhere for them to go.

They were thinking of looking for the woman-in-white again, but after looking for a while, they still could not see or even smell her fragrance. It was as if the woman had already become a distant and indistinct memory, adding to their sense of loss.

Deeply disappointed, the two boys walked shoulder to shoulder in the direction of the city gate.

Suddenly they felt something was different. A whiff of fragrance breeze blew, the woman-in-white came from behind and joined them; they walked together side by side. The boys were inwardly very happy, but they did not dare to express it; they did not dare to ask her even more.

When the gate was in sight, the woman-in-white coldly said, "Don't you two have any ideas. I am just afraid that Yuwen Huaji would catch up with you and take your 'Secret to Long Life' and present it to the tyrant and get the credit for it, before he finally send you away to a distant land. I am doing this to deal with Yuwen Huagu [sic], not that I have any particular good impression toward you, the two little demons."

Xu Ziling could not stand it anymore. He halted his steps and angrily said, “That being the case, no need to bother Dashi anymore. We have hands and feet, and we know how to run away. We don’t need your money either. Kou Zhong, give the money back to her!”

Kou Zhong wanted to speak up, but in the end he just sighed, took the money from his pocket, and handed it over to her.

“Pfft!” the woman-in-white stifled her laughter, reached out to grab the two boys’ arms, and pulled them to walk with her quickly. The instant they left the city gate, while heading toward the river, she released them and said, “Why such a temper? In all my life I have never learned how to curry favor like those girls trafficked into a brothel to work as prostitute; I have always lived a solitary life. Just consider I have offended you.”

It was the first time she was willing to lower her guard and plead with them. Xu Ziling, who actually had magnanimous nature, felt very bad instead. With a slight blush on his tender face, he said, “It’s not that I’ve never been looked down upon by others, it’s just that when Dashi looked down on me, I feel exceptionally angry and feel it was extremely unfair.”

Kou Zhong came closer and whispered in the woman-in-white’s ear, “This fellow falls in love with you.”

The woman-in-white elbowed Kou Zhong’s flank that he doubled-over in pain. She pointed her finger at him and angrily said, “If you dare to say such again to your Miss, I will ... I will slap your mouth.” She had wanted to say that she would kill Kou Zhong, but knowing that she would not have the heart to do so, she corrected herself just in time and said a much lighter punishment instead.

Xu Ziling was baffled, “What did he say?” he asked.

The woman-in-white glowered at him, but did not say anything. Momentarily the three of them did not know what to say.

The woman-in-white turned her gaze toward big and small boats moored along the pier outside the city. “How come there are so many boats sailing back from

the west, but no boat sails to the west?" she muttered to herself.

The two boys composed themselves and took a look; indeed it was strange.

The pier was full of people waiting to board their boats, busily talking to each other. Suddenly a gentle and pleasant voice was heard right next to them, "May I ask if Miss and these two Xiao Xiongdi [little brother] are waiting for your boat?"

Still clutching the painful spot, Kou Zhong stood up. He and Xu Ziling looked at the speaker up and down. Turned out it was the young master at the restaurant a while ago, the one who could not keep his eyes from the woman-in-white, and the one who later on settled their bill.

This man indeed looked naturally handsome, his demeanor was elegant, and he was still half a head taller than Xu Ziling, but did not look like a weak scholar. His back was straight, his shoulders broad. Although he was dressed like a scholar, he gave the impression of someone who was well-versed in martial art.

Without even turning her head, the woman-in-white said, "It's our business; it does not concern you!"

The young master was not offended at all; raising his cupped fist, he said, "Let me, Song Shidao, offer my apology first for offending a beauty. Zaixia [I, humble, see Chapter 4] did not dare to be presumptuous; it's just that noticing that Miss seemed to be puzzled by the boats turning back on the river, I ventured to inquire. There is no other intention."

Like a whirlwind the woman-in-white turned around. After sizing him up and down for a moment, she coldly said, "Speak up!"

Song Shidao was overwhelmed by the beauty's favor; he said in great delight, "The reason is Li Zitong's militia army from East China Sea; they had just crossed the Huai River, and formed an alliance with Du Fuwei, dealing a heavy blow to the Sui (Dynasty) army. Furthermore, they are sending an army going south. They are fast approaching Liyang. If Liyang is under attack, Yangtze River's waterway will be cutoff. Therefore, right now everybody simply adopts wait-and-

see approach. Nobody dares to venture to the west without being able to see the situation clearly.”

The two boys noticed how the woman-in-white was listening attentively. They also noticed that this Song Shidao seemed to be a lot stronger than they were; they could not help feeling deeply upset, yet they could do absolutely nothing.

While the woman-in-white was still deep in thought without saying anything, Song Shidao spoke up again, “Miss, if you don’t mind, you can take Zaixia’s boat. I guarantee that even if we come across thief army, you won’t be disturbed.”

The woman-in-white coldly stared at Song Shidao; she said indifferently, “You talk big; apparently you have a bit of background.”

With a straight face Song Shidao said, “How could Zaixia dare to ‘swing an axe before a carpenter’ in Miss’ presence? It’s just that my humble family can be considered as having a bit of reputation. As long as we fly our banner on the boat, friends on the road will give us a bit of face.”

At this point, even Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had no choice but to praise how this fellow has struck the right note; neither haughty nor humble, it was just right.

The woman-in-white swept the two boys with her gaze while she pondered in silence. Evidently she was a bit tempted. Traveling with the two kids by land, not only it was time consuming, they were bound to meet some mishaps as well. But if they travel by water and managed to cross Liyang, they would not have to be afraid Yuwen Huaji would catch up with them.

Kou Zhong could not resist, “I prefer to travel by land,” he said.

Before the woman-in-white could answer, Song Shidao already pressed her, “Excuse me Miss, these two Xiao Xiongdi are ...”

The woman-in-white impatiently cut him off, “Nothing, no relation whatsoever. Don’t ask anymore. Where is your boat?”

While Song Shidao was giving direction with great delight, Xu Ziling pulled Kou Zhong aside and said, “The time to go our separate ways has arrived. Let her ride her boat, we’ll travel our road.”

Kou Zhong aptly showed his lofty spirit; with a loud laughter he held Xu Ziling’s shoulders, “Good kid!” he praised. And then he pushed Xu Ziling to start walking to the west.

The woman-in-white angrily shouted, “Stop right there!”

Kou Zhong looked back and waved his hand, “Good bye!”

The woman-in-white stomped her foot angrily and said to Song Shidao, “Song Xiong, please board the boat first, we will come later.”

In a flash she was already behind the two boys. Capturing them, she brought them back like carrying chicken.

Song Shidao was puzzled, but recalling that the beauty has agreed to come onboard, there was no need for him to worry that he would not have the opportunity to win her favor later. So why would he have to worry about other things? Therefore, he happily ran after her.

Great Method Of Nine Mysteries

Four big ships [the original refers to ancient leather-clad warships] raised their anchor and set sail upstream to the west. Song Shidao talked big, naturally his background was not simple at all.

The fact was that at that time in Jianghu, in term of outstanding reputation, nothing can surpass the four powerful clans. But speaking about popularity, out of four surnames, only the Song family fit the bill. The Songs held the most power in the south. The Clan Leader, ‘Heavenly Saber’ Song Que held the title ‘Number One Saber Under the Heavens’.

When Yang Jian unified the world and established the Great Sui, because he was apprehensive of the Song Clan’s power, he adopted a policy to appease them by granting Song Que the title of ‘Zhen Nan Gong’ [duke who subdue/suppress the South]. Aware that the power of the Southern Dynasties [c. 420-589AD] was gone, Song Que pretended to bow before him to protect his clan. [Translator’s note: as I mentioned before, the ‘world’ here always refers to China. I know it’s simpler just to say ‘China’, but I

want the reader to know the different words to describe China. 'Tian Xia' (lit. under the sky) being one of those. Interestingly, the word 'China' itself does not exist in Chinese text.]

Among the four Clans, the other three had some blood relationship with non-Han people; but not this one of the few greats extant. To maintain the prestige of the southern clan, they persevered with tradition, strictly prohibited their clansmen from intermarrying with anybody outside the Han ethnic group; hence they were known in Jianghu as a Han orthodox clan.

During the reign of Emperor Wen, *i.e.* Yang Jian, although Song Que's influence was widespread, he still did not dare to act blindly without thinking. He concealed his own strength and bid his time, concentrated fully in building his power in secret to avoid inviting calamity. When Yang Guang ascended the throne, there were internal strife and external threat everywhere, imperial court was corrupt, armed rebellion rose up from all around. The Song Clan increased its level of activity once more.

Song Que's younger brother, 'Earthly Sword' Song Zhi, who was considered one of the top swordsmen, as well as top strategist in Jianghu, knew that Sui Dynasty's power was still considerably great; if they prematurely move their troops, they would immediately become the first target of Sui force. Hence he advised his older brother to postpone their rebellion against the Sui, but use their resources to accumulate wealth in all kinds of lucrative trading.

One of the most profitable businesses was transporting illegal salt from coastal regions inland via the Yangtze River. They obtained great profit this way. Song Shidao's four ships were precisely smuggling sea salt from the coast.

While the imperial court was corrupt, the Song family relied on their influence in the south to easily gain access thru all key places, and openly transport salt.

If there was any government official dared to investigate and arrest, they will be dealt with all kinds of method of intimidation. They even went as far as secret assassination to achieve their goal.

Even though there were rebel armies everywhere, as long as they see the Song family banner, nobody dared to offend them, for fear of making enemies of this powerful clan. Therefore, for the last few years, Song family's power grew in secret. So much so that they even finance several militia groups to weaken the Sui forces.

Song Que had four sons and two daughters. Song Shidao was the youngest of his sons, with specific duty to run the salt smuggling operation. His father doted on him very much.

His two daughters were Yuhua and Yuzhi; both had 'bashful

flower obstructing the moon' countenance. They were his fourth and sixth child, respectively. Three years ago Song Yuhua was given in marriage to Xie Wenlong, the son of Chengdu-based great hero Xie Hui of Sichuan.

Xie Hui's title was 'Wulin Panguan' [the Magistrate of Wulin; Pan Guan was the mythological judge of the underworld], a top martial art experts whose fame was on par with Song Que and Song Zhi; the founder of 'Du Zun Bao' [Bastion of Supremacy], one of the emerging new powerful surnames outside the original four powerful clans.

The Song-Xie marriage arrangement reeked with political as well as business deal smell; with these two great forces forming an alliance, Yang Guang would be more afraid to act rashly against them.

In this trip, the destination of these four ships was precisely Sichuan, delivering their cargo to 'Du Zun Bao', which, in turn, would be distributed to the local salt merchants.

This moment, in a spacious room on the second deck of one of the huge ships, Kou Zhong, who was wearing a pair of boots presented by County Deputy Chen as a gift, was lying on the bed, holding the 'Secret to Long Life' in his hands. He was deeply engrossed in studying one of the human diagrams in the book. Although there were chairs, Xu Ziling did not sit on one, he sat on

the floor instead, hugging his knees, with his back against the cabin wall. He was in turmoil.

Why was it that when he saw the woman-in-white and Song Shidao talking, he grew so jealous? Although concerning man-woman relationship he was a bit curious, he had never had any excessive expectation or even delusion. There was an extremely big gap in all aspect between he and the woman-in-white. In term of age, she was at least seven, eight years older than he was. Could it be that Kou Zhong was right, that he really had a crush on her?

But thinking about it, it did not seem to be the case.

When he looked at the girls from Spring Breeze Courtyard, he did have impulses to embrace them, but toward the woman-in-white, he did not have that kind of idea. Even when he had a close contact with her, his heart were brimming with respect, there was only warm love, with no lust or desire between men and women.

He could not bear not to ask, “Zhong Shaoye! Do you think I really fall in love with ... with that woman?” [Here the word is ‘nu ren’, not ‘po niang’ like before.]

“Don’t disturb me!” Kou Zhong was impatient, “I am studying the world’s most formidable martial art that is not martial art!”

The cabin was silent once again.

After half a day, Kou Zhong put down the ‘Secret to Long Life’, propped his head up, and then he got up from the bed and came over to Xu Ziling. Copying him, he sat on the floor. Holding Xu Ziling’s shoulders, he said, “I am sorry, I was in such a bad mood. I am afraid that even if Guigu Zi^[1] is reborn, he wouldn’t be able to make sense of this ghost book [play on words here: the ‘gui’ of Guigu Zi literally means ‘ghost’]. Hey! What did you just say?”

Seeing Xu Ziling was angry and did not want to talk, he hurriedly said, “I know, I remember now. Ha, a real man won’t worry about not finding a wife. That wo ... oh, that woman [he was going to say ‘po niang’ then changed it to ‘nu ren’] does not deserve us, two brothers. That Song Pidaos [‘pi’ means fart] can easily beat us with his hand tied and using just half of his skill. We’d better retain our mind and strength to take a look at this secret manual, to eat, poop and sleep. Ha ...”

Xu Ziling was still in distress, “But did I really fall in love with her?”

Kou Zhong racked his brain for a moment, and then calmly said, “The fact is, I was jealous as hell, same as you. But I don’t think that I fall in love with her. Hey! My feeling toward her is a bit like my feeling toward Zhen Sao [see Chapter 2]; she really does not deserve to be that stinky Ol’ Feng’s concubine, but I can do

nothing about it. Ah, right! I understand now. Xiao Ling, I think you regarded her as your Niang [mother, mommy]. Who would want his own Niang to remarry? Especially marrying that we-behind-the-ears whose talk is bigger than the sky, who only fit to be our servant, Chou Pidao [‘chou pi’ – smelly fart/arrogant]. Ha! This name Chou Pidao is more apt than Yuwen Huagu [see Chapter 5].”

Xu Ziling kept a stout face, but in the next instant he burst into a wild laughter; so wild that tears were streaming out his eyes.

Suddenly the door was pushed open.

The two boys looked up in shock, and saw the woman-in-white came in with icy-cold countenance like a layer of frost. She closed the door, and then stared fiercely at the two boys.

Quite a while later, she walked over to the two boys, knocked the cabin wall they were leaning on, and said, “Don’t forget who stays next door. Unless this wall is made of steel plate, each sentence of stinky words you speak will be transmitted into my ears.”

Kou Zhong struggled up and said, “We did not call you ‘po niang’, why did you come to us to vent your anger?”

The woman-in-white dropped down on one knee and

ferociously said, “What this woman or that woman [nu ren]? You two are dead little demons, stinky little demons!”

While speaking the last sentence, a fleeting smile escaped from the corners of her mouth. How could the two boys fail to see that she was not really angry? Xu Ziling was the first to speak up, “But we really don’t know your name!”

The woman-in-white lowered her voice, “And did you tell me your names?”

Kou Zhong showed an ‘oh, so that’s what it is’ look on his face. He made the introduction, “Xiaodi’s [little brother, referring to self] name is Kou on the top and Zhong on the bottom, and he is Xu Ziling. We are the Two Dragons of Yangzhou. May I ask Dashi’s honorable surname and great given name? And what is your nickname? Which holy place did you come from? Are you married?”

‘Pfft!’ the woman-in-white stifled a laughter muttered under her breath, “Dead little demon.” With that kind of unspeakably mesmerizing appearance, the two boys’ eyeballs almost popped out.

Just as quickly the woman-in-white’s frosty countenance returned as she frostily said, “Married or not married, it’s none of your business. If you talk about me behind my back, I will ... I will

...”

Showing concern, Kou Zhong asked, “What punishment this time? It would be best if you don’t slap my mouth or scrape my eyelid; it won’t look too good on me. Little demons should maintain their little demon’s face!”

The woman-in-white knew she could not do anything against him; she angrily said, “I will make you regret it. During dinner, you must not babble nonsense. Understand?”

Giggling, Kou Zhong said, “We’d better call Dashi our Niang in the future, then whenever we are using your money, we won’t have to feel embarrassed.”

A slight blush crept onto the woman-in-white’s face like red clouds, making her beautiful face even more lovely and alluring, particularly her spirited but tender eyes that can hook any man’s soul.

Kou Zhong signaled Xu Ziling with his eyes, the two of them called together, “Niang!”

Finally the woman-in-white could not take it anymore; she laughed and sat down. Gasping for breath, she said, “If I really have you, these two absolutely disgraceful, unfilial sons, I guarantee I will suffer headache and bowel disorders.”

Seeing she did not flatly refuse, but laughed so hard that her body shook instead, that she looked so charmingly happy, which he had never seen before, Kou Zhong became bolder and decided to strike while the iron was still hot, “My Niang, oh, my Niang, your child thinks that your martial art skill can be considered pretty good, after being injured by Yuwen Huagu, you took only several sichen to recover. You’d better teach us a couple of martial art techniques, let us master some unique family skills with which we can brightened our family’s social status and thus will not cause you to lose any face.”

[1] Guigu Zi (literally 'The Sage of Ghost Valley'), or Mr. Guigu, is thought to be the writer/compiler of the 6,000-7,000 Chinese-character book discussing techniques of political lobbying based in Daoist thinking; between the late Warring States period and the end of the Han Dynasty (source: Wikipedia).

His laughter was infectious. Once she started laughing, even though she knew that Kou Zhong was teasing her and trying to make her laugh, she still could not stop laughing that she needed to cover her mouth with her hand.

Gasping for breath, she scolded him, “Get your big ghost head lost. Little demon Xu is a lot more honest than you. Indeed a dog’s mouth cannot grow ivory.”

Kou Zhong pretended to be deeply hurt by this injustice; he said in tiny voice, “Xiao Ling is honest? My heavens! He is craftier than I am. It’s just that he fell in love with her Niang that he turns into a fool.”

Xu Ziling indignantly said, “How can I be crafty? All those crafty ideas came from you, but I, the fool, have always been the one who has to do it; and now you still come up with fabricated accusation and dump it on my head?”

The woman-in-white struggled hard not to laugh. Looking out the window at the glow of the setting sun, she sighed and said, “I must have committed some sins in my previous life that in this life I have two kids like you to annoy me. Alright, although fully aware that nothing good will come out of it, I’ll still teach you some kind of training method. If you really can master this skill, then I’ll consider teaching you swordsmanship. But you two are not my children; even more, you are not my disciples.”

The two boys’ spirit was greatly shaken, they asked in chorus, “What are you to us then?”

The woman-in-white was stunned. After staying silent for half a day, she said with wry smile, “Don’t ask me!” But there was a warm feeling rising up in her heart.

Even she herself could not understand why she felt it was hard to part with these two boys; so much so that when they called her 'Niang', she could not bring herself to reprimand them.

Herself was an orphan born in the chaos of war, which was adopted by a Gaoli martial art master Fu Cailin. Ever since she was a mere child, she was trained to be an assassin, in addition to learning Han people's language and culture. The reason she came to the south this time was precisely to be a part of a mission.

Happy and giggling, Kou Zhong said, "Being our Niang is most fitting. Let's strike while the iron is still hot. Oh my Niang, quickly teach your consummate skill to your child."

The woman-in-white gave him an angry stare, and then in a low voice she said, "My name is Fu Junchuo. If you like, you can call me Chuo Jie [older sister]. I really have never imagined that in this trip I would be involved with you, two little frivolous and naughty boys."

Kou Zhong noticed that her manner and her words differed greatly; he winked and said, "I still prefer to call you Niang, don't you? Xiao Ling?"

Fu Junchuo spoke tenderly, "The mouth is on your face, you can call me anything you want."

Xu Ziling was overwhelmed with emotion that he felt like crying, his eyes turned red. Hanging down his head, he called, “Niang!”

Fu Junchuo was also overwhelmed with emotions, it was quite a while later that she was able to suppress this emotion that very rarely surfaced. She coldly said, “You may call whatever you like, but no way I am willing to admit that you are my sons, and don’t expect even more that I will take you by my side. Alright, now I am going to teach you the fundamentals of sitting in meditation to cultivate your qi. This is the unique skill passed on by my master, without my explicit permission, you must not pass it on to anybody else, or else, even if I cannot bear to do it, I must follow my school’s law and kill you, two little demons.”

The two boys nodded their heads repeatedly signifying their promise.

Fu Junchuo solemnly said, “My master Fu Cailin achieved great success in combining martial arts from the Central Plains, Xiyu[2], and Gaoli, developing his own unique style. Therefore, together with Western Regions’ powerful hegemon ‘Wu Zun’ [wulin’s most venerable] Bi Xuan, Central Plains’ number one Taoist martial art expert ‘San Zhenren’[3] Ning Daoqi, became known as the three great masters of the present age. He once said that ‘it is sufficient to know from oneself every change of divine power’. He was saying that everyone has a treasure trove hidden deep within himself, the potential is boundless, but is blinded by all kinds of worldly attachments.”

“No wonder Niang said that one must start training since childhood, simply because children have the least worldly attachments, hence it is very likely that they will be able to break free and become enlightened.”

Fu Junchuo stared blankly for a moment and then said, “I have never thought it that way. Oh! You, this little kid, seem to have a bit of comprehension ability.”

Kou Zhong proudly said, “This child Xiao Ling is constantly inspired, it’s only natural that he is not much inferior.”

Fu Junchuo glowered at him and said, “This guy loves to show off his intelligence the most. Don’t be conceited, intelligent people often have the most distractions, and distracting thought is precisely the biggest barrier to training basic skills. Only by guarding your heart and total focus can you get rid of the ego, and become alert to the mystery of heavens. Everything will come one by one, and then going through the meridians [or channels] according to the training method, harmonizing the qi and the blood, regulating the adverse and the favorable going in and out in balance. Therefore, although the method is ever-changing, the basic idea is still this ‘One’ word.”

Scratching his head, Kou Zhong said, “In that case, isn’t the person with the highest martial art skill ought to be the most stupid person? Is Niang’s Shifu stupid and slow-witted?”

Fu Junchuo was angry, but was also stumped; knowing that it was not the fact, but did not know how to refute his argument. If it were before, she might just gave him a beating; but now, toward this child who kept calling her 'Niang', she was a bit fond of him.

While she was vexed, Xu Ziling spoke up on her behalf, "Certainly not. Someone who can master martial art skill and establish a sect must be able to create, only then would he be able to surpass the ordinary ability and accomplishments of previous generations. Therefore, the one Niang is referring to ought to be someone who is sharp but petty-minded, not someone with great wisdom and great intelligence, the one so-called 'highly skillful but appears clumsy'. Niang's Shifu must be this sort of 'great intelligence may appear to be stupidity' person."

Kou Zhong and Fu Junchuo stared at Xu Ziling as if it was the first time that they noticed that this person existed. They were both deeply moved. Fu Junchuo nodded and said, "Little demon Ling indeed has a little comprehension."

Kou Zhong happily said, "This little brother of mine indeed has a little comprehension. I'll say he usually looks clumsy and stupid, turns out he has great wisdom that appears to be stupidity, hidden deep without revealing anything, making laozi [I, your father; used jocularly] has to show-off my 'highly skillful but

appears clumsy' ability, which, in the end, making me the sharp but petty-minded person."

Fu Junchuo could not help knocking his head with her knuckles, while angrily said, "If you keep jesting [orig. impromptu comic material in opera performance], I won't teach you the training method."

Kou Zhong rubbed his head and protested, "Oh my Niang, next time would you just spank my bottom? Otherwise, if you badly knocked my head, how could I learn Niang's top quality training method?"

Fu Junchuo was not in the mood to bicker groundlessly with him; she simply said, "What I am about to teach you is called 'Great Method of Nine Mysteries'. It starts with one and end with nine. Other than Shifu, nobody has ever mastered the ninth Great Method. Even Niang ... oh! Even I only trained until the sixth."

Fu Junchuo blurted without thinking, calling herself 'Niang'. Embarrassed, her beautiful face turned red, making her looked even more irresistibly sweet and charming. Seeing the two boys trying to hide their laughter, she was greatly annoyed, "Don't laugh! You are the one who wears me out. Do you want to learn or not?"

The two boys hurriedly nodded their head promising they

wanted to learn.

It took Fu Junchuo quite a while before she was able to compose herself. She said, “Underneath it’s defending the form, above it’s defending the spirit. Spirit controls the spirit, mind controls the movement. Mind is movement, getting away from it means emptiness. This emptiness is an unusual emptiness, thus not empty is in fact emptiness. Peace and quiet is profound, its existence cannot happen by chance, where it goes cannot be pursued. Thus welcome it accordingly, because unintentional is actually intention. At the beginning the mysterious way become the first level.” [Translator’s note: my apology, these passages are way above my head, I simply translated it as close as I thought it literally means.]

After a short pause, she continued, “Don’t covet this first level. A lot of people spent their entire life and still unable to connect qi and mind, obtain the form but miss the spirit, until they finally quit midway, having achieving nothing.”

Seeing the two boys shook their heads and swayed their minds, looking as if they gained a lot, she was astounded. “Do you understand what I am saying?”

Kou Zhong asked in surprise, “Such a simple words, what’s so difficult to understand?”

Fu Junchuo recalled her Shifu's high praise that she was an amazing talent to train martial art, yet until today it was only after reaching the sixth level that she was truly able to grasp the essence of the method. How could these two boys understand just by hearing it once?

Pointing to Kou Zhong, she said, "You, explain it back to me."

The light from outside the window gradually dimmed; inside, the room was warm with faint fading light, carrying with it the desolate feeling of lapsing time.

Kou Zhong was stunned as he said, "You have said it very well, it's hard to find other words with which to explain it. If I have to explain it, I'll say that from a with-form method we need to enter the formless method, hoping to move the spirit. When the opportunity arrives, then we can have enough self-realization to access the formless treasure-trove within ourselves that Niang was referring to. Spirit and mind unleashed, then using unintentional thought resist and harness it, so that we can produce his mother's ... oh, I mean, produce the true qi. Heavens, can I start training now?"

Listening to this, Fu Junchuo was dumbstruck. This explanation was clearer than her own Shifu, Fu Cailin. This boy's innate talent was really high, it was just that he had been through horrifying situation that he could not progress further.

Xu Ziling said, “If Zhong Shaoye is that eager to train, it might be harmful to you instead. Speaking about unintentional is actually intention, it is referring to the kind of mental state where we intentionally forgoing the intention, where emptiness is not empty, where peace and quiet is profound, its existence cannot happen by chance, where it goes cannot be pursued.”

When Fu Junchuo heard this, her scalp felt numb. These two boys were like fine jade that has not been carved and polished; even she herself was somewhat inspired by this radiant light that penetrates ten thousand zhang of darkness.

Kou Zhong said in embarrassment, “I was just saying! But please, Niang, quickly teach us the with-form method, so that when the opportunity comes, I can keep on training, even when I eat or defecate.”

Fu Junchuo angrily scolded him, “Don’t speak foul language. Now I will teach you first how to sit cross-legged and the method to circulate the qi. I will say it just once and won’t repeat it.”

While the two boys’ mind was greatly excited, there was a knock on the door. Actually, it came from Fu Junchuo’s adjacent room.

Fu Junchuo sighed and said, “We’ll continue after dinner!”

Looking at the two boys' disappointed expression, she almost decided to turn down Song Shidao's invitation.

All of a sudden a warm feeling toward these two witty sons grew in her heart.

[2] Western Regions, a Han Dynasty term for regions beyond Yumen Pass; as in 'Journey to the West'.

[3] Zhenren literally means 'true man', a term of respect for Taoist master.

Jade Annulus Of The He Clan

Song Shidao prepared a banquet in the dining cabin, simple yet impressive. There was another couple in attendance. The man was around forty, but the hair on his entire head was white; he also wore a long silvery color beautiful beard, but oddly he did not look old at all. His bearing was elegant, bold and heroic, like an important character of a sect or a prominent family, yet his manner was very modest and polite.

The woman looked to be around twenty-five or twenty-six, rather flirtatious. Her attitude toward the man was very intimate, plus both her countenance and her physique were extremely titillating, giving other people a rather uneasy feeling. She reminded Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling of the ladies of the Spring Breeze Courtyard, but naturally her beauty was far superior to some Auntie Hong of the Courtyard.

According to Song Shidao's introduction, turned out the man was a well-known martial art expert of the Song Clan, the Silver Beard Song Lu, whose creation, the set of 'Silver Dragon Cane Techniques' was famous throughout Jiangnan [area south of

Yangtze River]. He was Song Shidao's [younger] uncle, one of the core-leaders of the Song Clan.

The woman was called Liu Jing, the new mistress of Song Lu, but nothing was mentioned about her background.

By the time Song Shidao wanted to introduce the three people, he suddenly realized that he did not even know these three's surnames and given names. While he was stuck in embarrassing situation, Fu Junchuo indifferently introduced themselves, without concealing anything.

Song Lu laughed and said, "The person who imparted Miss' internal skill obviously has first-class martial art skill; your sword style is brimming with exoticism. I wonder which superior master instructed such a brilliant character like Miss?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were secretly speechless; this man's fame was definitely no fluke. Although they had never heard Song Lu's name before, they knew that he must be a prominent figure; hence his eyesight was very sharp, his manner of speaking was very fitting. They could not help but admiring him, and it showed. Their gaze was actually more effective than any flattery, so that Song Lu immediately had a favorable impression toward them.

Fu Junchuo calmly replied, "Mr. Song, please forgive me.

Junchuo received a strict order not to disclose my background.”

Liu Jing cast a sidelong glance toward the two boys with her as-clear-as-shallow-autumn-creek eyes; she smiled and said, “Two Xiao Xiongdi look imposingly big and tall, why haven’t you practice Miss Fu’s martial art skill? I wonder what is your relation to Miss Fu?”

Kou Zhong stuck his chest out and clearing his throat he said, “We two brothers are ready to train our Niang’s first-class martial art skill. Thank you very much for Mrs. Song’s compliment.”

Hearing him saying ‘our Niang’, Song Shidao’s eyes fell on Fu Junchuo’s infinitely beautiful and tender body; with a changed countenance he asked, “Your Niang?”

Fu Junchuo’s charming eyes blushed slightly; after shooting an angry stare at Kou Zhong, she said in embarrassment, “Don’t listen to these two little demons’ crazy nonsense; they adamantly wanted to call me ‘Niang’.”

Xu Ziling rubbed his stomach theatrically and blurted, “Niang! Child is hungry.”

Liu Jing could not help laughing so hard that her body shook continuously. But Song Shidao and Song Lu, uncle and nephew, were baffled. They could not figure out the real relationship

between this stunning beauty and the two little demons.

Noticing the two boys were staring at Liu Jing like a lecher, Fu Junchuo felt a strange jealousy creeping into her heart. With a cold snort she said, “If you dare to babble nonsense again, let’s see if I ... if I ...”

Casting his doubt aside, Song Shidao said, “Miss Fu and Xiao Xiongdi, please come into our dining room, we can continue our chat while we eat.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were youngsters after all; seeing Song Shidao treated them with respect, their jealousy diminished considerably. Plus they saw on the table was a sumptuous spread of food delicacies [orig. ‘rarities from the mountain and the sea’], hurriedly they entered the dining room and sat down in total ignorance of Jianghu etiquette.

By this time Song Shidao was already able to more or less see the two boys’ real background; hence he did not mind them too much. He politely invited Fu Junchuo to take a seat, and then Song Shidao and Song Lu took their seat as the host on either side of her. Liu Jing sat next to Song Lu, followed by Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling.

Two attendants immediately rushed forward to fill everybody’s cup with wine. Fu Junchuo said, “I have never moisten my lips

with wine, and these two are underage, they ought not to drink wine as well. So gentlemen and lady, please enjoy yourselves.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were dying to have a taste of fine wine; hearing her, naturally they were quite disappointed, and it showed clearly on their faces.

Fu Junchuo was inwardly very pleased; she was finally able to put these two lecherous little demons back in check.

Song Lu laughed, “In that case, let’s everybody not drink wine. Xiao Jing [little Jing], do you have any problem?”

Liu Jing also laughed tenderly, “How can qie [I, your servant; deprecatory self-reference for women] have any problem? I am afraid the ones with the problem are these two Xiao Xiongdi.”

Kou Zhong stuck his chest out, “A leader can submit or can stand tall as required. We can drink, we can not drink. How can there be any problem?”

The three Song family people were accustomed to spend their time at the docks; they have seen all kinds of situation, big and small. Looking at the two boys, they knew that they were trying to make do in spite of adversity, yet they did not wish to expose them. Thereupon they changed the subject.

Apparently Song Lu was a food connoisseur; he casually introduced each dish on the table, and talked about the art of cooking. Listening to him, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, whose tummy always alternated between full and hungry, were stupefied. Their hands, however, did not stay idle; they attacked the vegetable and meat dishes systematically in a sweep-clean operation.

Fu Junchuo was not interested in the food, she only ate two strips of Chinese cabbage, and already put her chopsticks down. Her jade countenance was still as calm as the water, her beauty really looked like Guanyin Bodhisattva descending to earth.

The more Song Shidao looked at her, the more he fell in love. But because Song Lu indicated that she may have come from outside the Central Earth, he felt like his heart was pierced by a sharp thorn, because their Song Clan had a strict rule against intermarriage with different tribe. If this stunning beauty was really of a different tribe, unless he was willing to abandon his family, the two of them would never be brought together by fate.

Liu Jing did not dare to either compliment or criticize Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, two boys' table manner, but she found them to be extremely amusing. With a smile on her face she watched them sweeping the dishes clean like the wind sweeping the clouds. From time to time she even picked the dish for them and served them attentively.

After the attendants took away the bowls and the dishes, Song Lu personally served everybody tea.

Noticing that Fu Junchuo was not interested in talking about food, Song Lu changed the subject, “Miss Fu, I wonder if you have deep understanding of our Central Earth’s matters?”

Song Shidao immediately looked nervous; he knew that Song Lu was able to see his infatuation toward Fu Junchuo, hence he tried to test her to verify whether she was indeed of a different tribe, while at the same time telling Song Shidao to kill his heart.

Fu Junchuo responded emotionlessly, “How can Mr. Song judge from my sword style that Junchuo is of foreign origin?”

Song Shidao’s handsome eyes immediately lit up.

Song Lu apologetically said, “Please forgive the Ol’ Song for being rude and impetuous. I was just wondering if Miss has ever heard about the matter concerning the He Clan’s jade annulus?” In the end he was still an old fox; in a roundabout way he was still testing where Fu Junchuo came from.

Like a school children, Kou Zhong raised his hand and said, “I heard about it. King Zhaoxiang of Qin exchanged fifteen cities for King Huiwen of Zhao’s ‘subduing the nation’ treasure, the He Clan’s jade annulus. The Zhao King sent Lin Xiangru [c. 3rd

century BC, a famous statesman of Zhao] to escort the He Clan's jade annulus to see the Qin King. The Ol' Lin handled the jade annulus belonging to other people in a stupid way. Fortunately the Qin King was more stupid than he was, he let him bring the He Clan's jade annulus back to Zhao. This is called some his mother's 'returning the jade annulus to Zhao'." [Chinese idiom, meaning 'to return something intact to its rightful owner'.]

Everybody was laughing. Liu Jing laughed the hardest. Pointing to Kou Zhong, she asked, "So what happened to the He Clan's jade annulus afterwards?"

Fu Junchuo was grateful in her heart; she knew that Kou Zhong was afraid she could not answer the question, hence he rushed in to answer it for her, while at the same time she was startled by this 'son's quick wit.

It was only because he had heard Bai Lao Fuzi [See Chapter 1] telling the story of 'returning the jade annulus to Zhao' that he had something to say. As for how it returned to Zhao and what happened afterwards, he had no idea. "I am afraid only Laotianye [God/Heaven] knows," he said in embarrassment.

Liu Jing laughed even harder that her body shook all over as she leaned toward Song Lu; her seductive appearance grew without restraint.

Seeing the kid was able to make his beloved concubine roaring in laughter and looked so carefree, Song Lu was happy. Momentarily he forgot to continue his probing on Fu Junchuo's background. He patiently explained, "Later on this He Clan's jade annulus ended in Qin Shihuang's[1] hand. He ordered Li Si[2] to compose a couplet 'shou ming yu tian, ji shou yong chang' [lit. to become Emperor by the grace of Heaven, (enjoy) both long life and eternal well-being. Wikipedia translation: 'Having received the Mandate from Heaven, may (the emperor) lead a long and prosperous life'], eight characters in seal script that look like birds and bugs, and have jade and stone craftsmen to engrave the jade annulus. Thereupon the He Clan's jade annulus has become the Emperor's seal."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling showed an 'oh, so that's how it is' look on their faces.

Song Shidao was afraid Song Lu might continue interrogating Fu Junchuo, he continued, "After Han founder Liu Bang[3] overthrew the Great Qin Dynasty [221-207BC], Qin King, Ziying offered the He Clan's jade annulus to Liu Bang. Liu Bang called it the Imperial Seal [orig. chuan guo xi, seal of state that was passed on]. Henceforth the He Clan's jade annulus became a symbol of rise and fall of the nation. Later on Wang Mang[4] intended to seize the throne, he sent his younger brother Wang Shun to Changle Palace to demand the jade annulus from Empress Dowager Xiaoyuan, making Empress Dowager Xiaoyuan angry and threw it to the floor; as a result the corner broke. Wang Mang

ordered a goldsmith to fill the broken corner with gold.
Henceforth He Clan's jade annulus also had another elegant name, 'jade body gold corner'."

[1] Qin Shihuang, first emperor of China, 259-210BC.

[2] Li Si, (c. 280-208 BC), Legalist philosopher, calligrapher and Prime minister of Qin kingdom and Qin dynasty from 246 to 208 BC.

[3] Han Gaozu Liu Bang (256 or 247-195 BC), bandit leader who became the first Han emperor, reigned 207-195 BC.

[4] Wang Mang (45 BC-23 AD), usurped power and reigned 9-23 between the former and later Han.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "This story must be fake; if He Clan's jade annulus was thrown really hard like that, how could it not shatter?"

Song Lu emotionally replied, "Kou Xiao Xiong [little brother] certainly has clear understanding like deities, but this story is absolutely true. It was because the jade was not an ordinary jade. In those years, a Chu[5] man named Bian He went to Mount Jingshan [Hubei] to chop firewood. He saw a beautiful phoenix perched on a piece of bluestone. Recalling that 'phoenix don't

perch on anything that is not a treasure' he concluded that this bluestone must be a treasure; thereupon he presented the stone to King Li of Chu. Who would have thought that all precious stone craftsmen of the Chu court pointed out that the stone Bian He presented was an ordinary stone? In his anger King of Chu chopped his left foot and expelled him from his presence. In his heart Bian He felt he was wronged. When King Wu ascended the throne, again he presented the treasure, this time his right foot was cut-off. When King Wu's son, King Wen ascended the throne, he heard about this matter, and had the bluestone brought back to the Palace. He ordered the artisans to carve and polish with utmost care, and cut open the stone. From inside they obtain a piece of glossy, flawless, sparkling and translucent, bright and clean, wonderful treasure that was out-of-this-world. In honor of Bian He, henceforth it was called He Shi Bi [jade disc of He]."

[Translator's note: Wikipedia has a full entry on He Shi Bi in English, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/He_Shi_Bi]

Song Shidao said, "If it were ordinary jade, it's impossible for the Chu court's precious stone craftsmen not to know it. Their mistake was to think it was an ordinary stone. Moreover, precious stones have never been found on Mount Jingshan. Evidently He Clan's jade annulus was totally different from other jade or precious stones. Also, it was the first time that such amazing treasure was discovered; therefore, nobody recognized it. Being thrown down to the ground and broke only one corner clearly demonstrated He Clan's jade annulus' extraordinary property."

This time, even Fu Junchuo showed interest. She asked, “What actually is the He Clan’s jade annulus?”

It was the very first time that this beautiful woman ever asked him anything. Song Shidao was secretly very happy; he gladly explained, “According to our Song Family legend from the ancient times, this piece of jade is a magical stone that came from the world of the immortals; it contains a world-shattering secret, only nobody knows what the secret is.”

Xu Ziling was curious, “So in whose hand is the He Clan’s jade annulus now?” he asked.

Liu Jing laughed and said, “Legend has it that by the time of Emperor Shao[6] of the end of Han Dynasty, He Clan’s jade annulus was lost. By the time of the Three Kingdoms [220-280AD], the governor of Changhe [lit. ‘long river’, not sure if it is a province name; can’t find it in the list of provinces of modern China] Sun Jian[7] was patrolling inside Luoyang[8] city walls, suddenly he saw rays of light radiated all around from a water well. He ordered his men to investigate, and they dredged up the corpse of an imperial concubine. There was a red box hanging from her neck, when they opened it, it was precisely the He Clan’s jade annulus. When Sun Jian went to war and died, the He Clan’s jade annulus fell into Cao Cao’s[9] hand, which he then passed on to his later generations. Until the Sui [dynasty] exterminated the Southern Chen [557-589], Yang Jian searched everywhere in the

Chen Palace, but he failed to find the He Clan's jade annulus that was supposedly among the treasures hidden by the Chen Lord. This has been a matter for regret for Yang Jian in all his life."

Fu Junchuo could not resist asking, "Gentlemen, why did you suddenly bring up this He Clan's jade annulus matter?"

Song Shidao's countenance changed, "Apparently although Miss is in Jianghu, you did not quite know what major event is happening in Jianghu."

Stroking his beard, Song Lu said, "He Clan's jade annulus, Yang Gong's [Duke Yang, see Chapter 1] treasure-trove, the two are actually one, they can pacify the world [again 'tian xia', *i.e.* China]. Right now fire beacons are everywhere, everybody wants to be the world's emperor. So the people under the heavens are vying to obtain these two things. Recently there is a rumor in Jianghu that He Clan's jade annulus has appeared in Luoyang, hence people who think that they have some ability are rushing to Luoyang to try their luck. In this trip, after delivering the goods to Sichuan, we may make a trip to Luoyang to see what will the Song Family's destiny be."

This Song Lu's demeanor was extremely elegant, no matter how big he talked, he always made the listeners feel comfortable.

Kou Zhong's eye lit up; he said, "Whoever obtain the He Clan's

jade annulus may obtain the world. Ha! Xiao Ling and I will also go to try our luck.”

Fu Junchuo’s eyes flashed with cold light; staring hard at Kou Zhong, she said, “Do you think you, these two little demons fit to do that? I definitely won’t allow you to go to Luoyang. If you keep indulging yourselves in wild fantasy, later on I will not ... I will not pay any more attention you.”

She was going to say ‘I will no teach you the secret method’, but at the last moment she corrected herself. Naturally the power of her threat was greatly diminished.

Song Lu was still unclear of the relationship among these three people, but although Fu Junchuo was using harsh words, it was clear that she showed concern toward these two free-spirited boys.

Song Shidao warmly said, “Miss Fu is right. It would be wise not to take advantage of this excitement, especially because the He Clan’s jade annulus involves the most mysterious sect in Wulin. This sect sends out their people every so often to enter the world to practice their religion; they are becoming more unpredictably mysterious.”

“What sect is that?” Fu Junchuo asked in amazement.

“Miss Fu is asking the right people,” Song Lu replied, “If you asked other people, there is a good chance that they have not even heard about it.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling’s interest was greatly piqued; they were listening attentively.

Song Shidao said, “This sect is called Ci Hang Jing Zhai [ci – compassionate/merciful, hang – boat/ship/to sail/to fly, jing – calm/quiet, zhai – abstain from meat, wine/give alms, hence it is some kind of religious organization; I checked xlandhenry’s translation and he/she uses ‘monastery’]. For the last several hundred years, it has an unsurpassed status among the black/mysterious organizations; but those who know the Jing Zhai location are unwilling to reveal anything pertaining to this Sect. Therefore, although because of He Clan’s jade annulus we conducted open enquiries and secret searches on this Jing Zhai, what we know is not too much. We only know that the practitioners of this heavenly law are women. It was said that one time the number one martial art expert of the Taoist sect, Shan Zhenren [see Chapter 6] Ning Daoqi went up the Jing Zhai to look for the presiding master to discuss martial art. Surprisingly, the presiding master of the Jing Zhai let him look at their treasured book, ‘Ci Hang Sword Canon’. Before Ning Daoqi finished reading, he already vomited blood and was injured; in the end he retreated from this awkward situation. Not many people know about this, hence it is not spread in Jianghu.”

Kou Zhong slapped Xu Ziling's shoulder and said with a sigh, "Now that is the real secret manual!"

Among those people, naturally only Xu Ziling and Fu Junchuo knew what he was talking about.

Song Lu sighed and said, "There are people beyond people, there are skies above the sky. The more we learn, the more we realize how minuscule our knowledge is; then we won't dare to rely on force to go on the rampage anymore."

Delighted, Xu Ziling said sincerely, "Song Daye [big master, as in master-servant relationship] is indeed a great man." In Yangzhou, he was used to call other people Daye, hence he automatically used that appellation.

Song Lu laughed and said, "Two Xiao Xiongdi's basis and bones are extremely good. If I came across you a few years earlier, the Ol' Song will definitely let you get away."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's countenances changed, their hearts sank. Their Niang has told them that, and now Song Lu said the same thing; apparently they could forget being martial art experts in this lifetime.

[5] Chu, a kingdom during the Spring and Autumn and Warring

States Periods (722-221 BC).

[6] Emperor Shao of Han (176–190) (other name King of Hongnong), was briefly an emperor of China during the Han dynasty; his name literally means ‘young emperor (of Han), a name which he shares with several other emperors with brief reigns. He came to power in 189 and was deposed and then poisoned by Dong Zhuo in 190.

[7] Sun Jian (155-191), famous general at end of Han dynasty, forerunner of the southern kingdom of Wu of the Three Kingdoms.

[8] Luoyang, a prefecture level city in Henan, old capital from pre-Han times.

[9] Cao Cao (155-220), famous statesman and general at the end of Han, noted poet and calligrapher, later warlord, founder and first king of Cao Wei, father of Emperor Cao Pi; he was also the main villain of novel the Romance of Three Kingdoms.

Fu Junchuo’s heart went with them. She decided right then and there to try her best to see if there was any way she could reverse the hopeless situation [orig. ‘reverse the rotation of the sky’], to train them well. Her heart grew warm as she said, “It’s late, I want to go to bed a bit early tonight.”

Although Song Shidao a hundred times, a thousand times unwilling, he had no choice but to do as she wished, *i.e.* to end the dinner banquet.

Kou Zhong actually wanted to ask what the relationship between the He Clan's jade annulus and the Ci Hang Jing Zhai, but first, he was afraid Fu Junchuo would not be happy, second, he was dying to start learning the Great Method of Nine Mysteries. Thereupon he kept his mouth shut and, along with Xu Ziling, simply followed Fu Junchuo back to their room.

Inside Fu Junchuo's cabin, the three of them sat cross-legged facing each other in a triangle. Moonlight penetrated the room, shedding its ray on Fu Junchuo's body, making her look more like Guanyin Dashi descending to the mortal world.

With solemn expression Fu Junchuo spoke softly, "Do you know why I left and then came back to rescue you from the hands of that county magistrate, and then at Danyang we separated, but again I could not help returning to you?"

Looking at her serious expression, Kou Zhong did not dare to crack a joke, he seriously replied, "Is it because Niang cherishes us?"

Fu Junchuo sighed and said, "You can say that. Among Yuwen Huaji's personal attendants, there is one sent by our Gaoli King,

that's why after I sent you to Beipo County, I made a secret contact with him, inquiring about the condition of Yuwen Huaji's injury."

Xu Ziling happily said, "So Yuwen Huaji was also injured?"

"Of course," Fu Junchuo proudly said, "How could my Jiu Xuan Shengong [divine power of nine mysteries] stay idle and not inflict any damage? How could he not be injured? But he can be considered rare, he only needed to meditate for a couple of sichen [i.e. 4 hours] and already his strength was completely restored. Just from this fact I can deduce that he is still one layer above me. At the same time, I can also deduce that in order to get the 'Secret to Long Life', he won't spare any effort to hunt and capture you. That's why I came back to rescue you, these two little demons. How can I let that tyrant of ten thousand evils live long?"

Kou Zhong forced himself to say, "Niang can always take our 'Secret to Long Life' away and then find any place to bury it; clean hands clean feet, it's much better than being burdened by the two of us!"

Fu Junchuo cut him off, "I simply don't like doing unethical things like that."

Xu Ziling's heart was touched. He asked, "Then why did Niang

want to leave us at Danyang?”

Fu Junchuo heaved a deep sigh. She said grimly, “Didn’t we get together in the end? I don’t know why I treated you, these two irritating little demons, well. I was thinking of leaving you at Danyang, giving you enough traveling expense so that you could go your own way, and just forget about it. But after thinking deeper, Yuwen Huaji is able to utilize the power of the world’s government officials, in the end you won’t escape his evil claw; hence I couldn’t help but coming back to you. Do you think I fancy that Song Shidao? Not a chance! I had made up my mind long ago to die for my country; how could I be interested in man-woman relationship? I just want to borrow their ship to get you two far away from danger. Once the ship docks at the pier, we will leave the ship to go ashore, flee to the rebel territory, then that Yuwen Huaji will be helpless to catch you.”

Kou Zhong resolutely said, “We might as well destroy the ‘Secret to Long Life’ first, so that even if that Yuwen Huagu manages to catch up with us, he still won’t get the treasured book.

Fu Junchuo and Xu Ziling were greatly surprised; they had never expected that this kid, who was usually greedy for wealth and greedy for benefit, would be willing to make this kind of sacrifice.

Fu Junchuo nodded. “Hearing Xiao Zhong [little Zhong] said so, I am really happy,” she said, “But for the time being, we are not that desperate yet. Let me teach you the meditation skill first. But you must promise me on an oath that before the day you reached the first level of qi and mind connection, you are not allowed to mingle out in Jianghu. Just quietly find a small town, hide from the chaos of war, and peacefully and happily live the rest of your lives.”

Xu Ziling’s eyes turned red as he said, “Niang! You are really good to us.”

Kou Zhong was also deeply moved, “Even if our own Niang came back to life, they wouldn’t be as good as you.”

The two boys immediately made an oath.

Fu Junchuo taught them to put their palms together in front of their chest, and then she said, “Prior to training your skill, you must train your character first. Remove all distracting thoughts, and then sit cross-legged with left leg facing out, right leg facing in, use yang [positive/male principle in Taoism] to embrace yin [negative/female principle]; left hand thumb pinches the middle finger, right hand thumb enters the left hand and make a circle. Right hand on the outside, using yin to surround yang. This is called Nine Mysteries Meridian Chain Secret. The four limbs also join together as a chain. Four gates tightly closed to guard the

median.”

Xu Ziling was puzzled, “Niang, didn’t you say that Great Method of Nine Mysteries is heavy on spirit and light on form? Why do we have to pay particular attention to form like this?”

Fu Junchuo was speechless for half a day. Finally she sighed and said, “If you really can succeed in mastering this divine skill, you must establish a sect, with your innovative idea you could be a peerless great master. I have never questioned the method like you do. But I can only teach you based on a proven method. If you can figure out other ways, you can always try it. But your heart and the method must be in agreement with each other; otherwise an unexpected disaster might occur.”

Kou Zhong sighed in admiration, “Niang is indeed open-minded, the Shifus teaching their disciples in the martial art court have never taken this kind of approach.”

Thereupon Fu Junchuo explained in details the position and capacity of the Eight Extraordinary Channels[10] and all major acupuncture points, while repeatedly pointing to these acupoints on their bodies.

By the time the two boys memorized everything, it was already the third watch of the night [between 11pm – 1am].

This moment the big ship suddenly slowed down. From the shore they could hear a faint howling.

All three people's countenance changed.

[10] Eight Extraordinary Channels (Qi Jing Ba Mai) - These consist of the channels of Ren, Du, Chong, Dai, Yinwei, Yangwei, Yinjiao and Yangjiao. They differ from the Twelve Regular Channels in that they neither pertain to any organ, nor do they share an exterior-interior relationship between each other. Their main function is to regulate the circulation of energy (qi⁴) and blood in the Twelve Regular Channels. When the regular channels are satiated, excess qi and blood flow into the Eight Extraordinary Channels to be stored for later use. (Huang Yushi, wuxiapedia.com)

In So Much Pain, Wishing For Death

Yuwen Huaji's forceful voice came from the right shore, "I wonder which honorable person from the Song Clan presides over this fleet of ships, please pull toward the shore and halt the ships, let Yuwen Huaji get on board to send my regards."

Inside the cabin, Fu Junchuo and the two boys looked at each other. They did not expect Yuwen Huaji would catch up with them this quickly.

This moment the four large ships were heading toward the left shore instead; obviously they were afraid Yuwen Huaji would fly toward their ship, or perhaps he would use arrows to attack from the distance.

From the bow Song Lu's laughter soared to the sky, "Yuwen Daren, I trust you have been well since we last met. Song Lu pays his respect."

While spurring his horse to pursue the ship, Yuwen Huaji laughed and replied, "Turns out it's the Silver Beard with a Silver

Dragon Cane, Song Xiong, now everything will be alright. Would Song Xiong please have your fleet pull toward the shore first, so that Xiongdi [brother, referring to self] can tell you the details?”

Song Lu laughed and said, “Yuwen Xiong flattered Xiaodi [little brother, referring to self] too much. If Yuwen Daren were in Xiaodi’s shoes, suddenly saw martial art masters from the Capital flocked in in the middle of the night, telling us to stop along the river, while Xiaodi’s ships are loaded with valuable goods, for the sake of safety, how could I not inquire clearly first the purpose of Yuwen Daren’s visit?”

Yuwen Huaji was extremely shrewd, he did not get angry at all; he said cheerfully, “That’s easy. This time this officer [referring to self] received the Sage’s [referring to the Emperor] order to capture three offenders to the throne. Reportedly the Fourth Gongzi has paid the bills of these offenders at a restaurant in Danyang, and later on he even invited them to come aboard his ship. I wonder if there is indeed such thing?”

Without even thinking Song Lu replied, “Someone must be trying to frame us up. Would Yuwen Daren please return and report to the Holy Sage that if I, Song Lu, see these offenders, I will personally capture them to bring them to justice, I will send them under escort to the Capital. It’s late! The Ol’ Song is going back to his cabin to sleep.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling did not expect Song Lu to hold yi qi [spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice, code of brotherhood] like this. Without the slightest hesitation he simply refused to hand them over to him; they did not even hear him asking whether the offender was male or female, he simply asked Yuwen Huaji to return to the Capital. Hence they knew that he would not betray them. Such character indeed deserved to be called a hero and a warrior.

Yuwen Huaji threw his head back and laughed aloud, “Song Xiong is quick to act and quick to speak. In this case Xiaodi won’t hide anything from you. Although for the time being Song Xiong can enjoy your peace, you will only invite endless trouble in the future. Furthermore, this officer can push the blame to your Song Clan. When the Sage’s dragon heart is angry, I am afraid Song Xiong and your family won’t feel better either.”

Song Lu said, “Yuwen Daren always loves to exaggerate, but you forget that mouth also grows on other people’s faces. Hearing Daren inflicts misfortune to my humble family, there will be another story in the Jianghu. It seems to me Yuwen Xiong’s consideration is less than thorough.”

Yuwen Huaji seemed to be listening with great delight; he laughed until he was out of breath and said, “In that case, this officer will not rush back to the Capital just yet. I will quietly wait Song Xiong’s honorable self at the Weeping Ghost Gorge ahead, where the river is comparatively narrower, so that we can talk a

bit more conveniently, no need for us, brothers, to shout until our voices hoarse.”

Again Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling’s countenance changed. Fu Junchuo suddenly stood up and said, “I, Fu Junchuo, have received enough kindness from Han people, I will not implicate other people anymore. Come, let’s go.”

The two boys haven’t even had the chance to hear Song Lu’s response when Fu Junchuo grabbed their belts and broke out through the window. Like a big bird they flitted across the surface of the river over four zhang or so distance toward the left riverbank.

Song Lu’s surprised cry and Yuwen Huaji’s angry roar could be heard almost simultaneously before the three people entered the forest.

The wind cut through Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling’s ear as Fu Junchuo took them soaring like a cloud or like riding on the mist, entering deep into the forest. In just a short moment they have covered over ten li. They felt that they were climbing higher and higher, the terrain was gradually getting steeper and more rugged. It was not until Fu Junchuo set them down that they realized that they were up on a high mountain. The mountain breeze blew, the two boys were so cold that their teeth chattered.

Rounding around the mountaintop, Fu Junchuo brought the two boys to a shallow cave where on both sides the mountain rocks, the trees and the grass were tall, so that they could hide inside and were temporarily sheltered from the cold wind.

Kou Zhong let out a relieved sigh and said, “So dangerous! Fortunately we are on the other side of Yangtze River, Yuwen Huagu cannot chase after us.”

Fu Junchuo sighed and said, “Maybe it’s impossible for other people, but Yuwen Huagu only needs a piece of dry stick, and he could easily cross the Great River. You, this kid, really don’t understand anything.”

Shocked, Xu Ziling said, “Why don’t we quickly run away then?”

Fu Junchuo sat cross-legged. With a bitter smile she said, “If I have trained to the ninth level, I would surely be able to continue carrying you away, but with my ability, I can only bring you here.”

Kou Zhong probed further, “If Yuwen Huagu crossed the River and pursued to this place, where should we flee to?”

Fu Junchuo flatly replied, “Someone with strong martial art skill like Yuwen Huaji has a lot stronger sense compared to ordinary person. We only need to leave some scent and traces along the way, and we could forget about evading his eyes and nose.

Alright, stop talking, I want to meditate to build up my qi, hopefully by the time he arrive, my strength will be restored, and then I can fight him to the death.”

Finished speaking, she closed her eyes and went into meditation.

The two boys dejectedly sat close to each other; they did not even dare to discuss their situation, for fear that they might agitate their Niang.

As time passed, the two boys’ anxiety slipped away bit by bit.

Suddenly Fu Junchuo stood up and whispered, “He’s here! He is alone.”

The two boys followed her standing up. Kou Zhong said in trembling voice, “Just give the book to him and be done with it.”

Fu Junchuo turned around and spoke sternly, “Are you still considered human being? How can you say such thing?”

Xu Ziling said softly, “He is only concerned over Niang.”

The bright moon high up in the sky shone its light down below. Fu Junchuo sighed. And then ‘Pfft!’ she laughed and said, “Xiao Zhong must not blame Niang, I am so used to scolding you!”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's whole body trembled. Under different circumstances, with Fu Junchuo willing to call herself their Niang, they would be utterly delighted; this time, however, they felt ill omened.

Fu Junchuo said in a low voice, "No matter what happens, you must not get out of here. Niang will definitely take you leave this place."

Yuwen Huaji's laughter was heard outside the cave, "For those two boys' sake Miss has revealed your hiding place. It was really unwise. These past few years, Miss has twice disguised yourself as a palace maid and penetrated the Palace to assassinate the Holy Sage, yet we could not even touch the tail of your gown. I had never expected that this time, for the sake of a ghost book, Miss felt compelled to show off your trace. If not for Miss granting these two kids a favor, even I, Yuwen Huaji, have to eat dust, I would never overcome Miss' lightness skill."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other. Turned out their Niang has entered the Palace to assassinate Yang Guang; even more, for their sake she has made such a big sacrifice, otherwise, with her lightness skill, which even Yuwen Huaji was ashamed of being inferior, how could Yuwen Huaji catch up with her?

Fu Junchuo's hand was already on the hilt of her sword. Under the hazy moonlight, she appeared majestic and stately. "Yuwen

Huaji,” she said coldly, “You came here alone, aren’t you afraid that you may not be the sword in my hand’s match?”

Yuwen Huaji laughed and said, “Although the sword in Miss’ hand is formidable, but how much weight it carries, I think you and I are already well aware of. If you want to slaughter me, Yuwen Huaji, you’d better make your move right away. Otherwise, if my men catch up with us, Miss will lose this golden opportunity.”

Fu Junchuo said indifferently, “Since you, Yuwen Huaji, are so eager to die, let me help you fulfill your wish!”

Her silhouette flashed, Fu Junchuo had already flown out; followed by the continuous sound of qi clashing against each other.

Both sides carries the almost the same thought in their hearts; both were disregarding his and her life, and both were going all out. Under the moonlight shining on the mountain ridge, Yuwen Huaji was seen standing on top of a giant boulder, while Fu Junchuo looked like a ghostly smoke, attacking him from four sides, eight directions. The blade in her hand turned into myriad of sword tips, like tidal wave of mercury crashing against the opponent; it was a totally hard fight where both sides were staking everything they got.

The expression on Yuwen Huaji's long face was solemn and respectful, his hands turned into fist or claw or open palm, interspersed with kicks here and there, as if he turned into an exorcist dealing with Fu Junchuo's wild, out-of-this-world attacks.

The two boys vowed that they would never forget his appearance for as long as they live. Although they were separated by a good seven, eight zhang away from him, the wind generated by the fierce battle still assaulted them that they felt the burning pain was about to crack their skin open, and it was difficult for them to keep their eyes open.

When they could not take it anymore, they shrunk back into the rock crevices. By the time when they looked out again, the situation has changed. Fu Junchuo flew over Yuwen Huaji, her sword moved even faster, more vicious, and extremely ruthless; she was going on an all-out offensive without any defensive move at all. But the fact was that Yuwen Huaji could only defend without being able to counter. Apparently he was falling into disadvantageous position.

This time the two boys' endurance was even worse; they could only blink several times, and were already forced to withdraw with eyes so painful that tears streaming down their face.

Right this moment, they heard Yuwen Huaji's angry shout and Fu Junchuo's muffled grunt outside. Forgetting the pain in their

eyes, the two boys could not resist stretching out their heads to look. In a daze, they seemed to see white shadow floating over. By the time they realized what had happened, their belts tightened, as Fu Junchuo carried them up. Once again they felt like soaring above the clouds or riding into the mist as they flew down the mountain.

In their hearts the two of them were wild with joy, because once again Yuwen Huaji had been beaten back by their incomparably formidable Niang.

This time Fu Junchuo did not hold back at all, she carried them in wild rush toward the most desolate wilderness, without uttering a single word. By dawn they had reached a valley, where finally she set them down.

The two boys crawled up with weary waist and aching back, only to see Fu Junchuo dropped down and sat on the ground, her pretty face was deathly pale, without the slightest sign of life.

The two boys were so scared that their soul flew out and scattered away; they scrambled to her side and wailed, "Niang, you are hurt."

Fu Junchuo revealed a trace of tender smile as she reached out to grab the two boys' shoulders, and disregarding any taboo between men and women, she pulled them down into her

bosom, letting their heads resting on her breasts. With a voice full of tenderness she said, “My, Fu Junchuo, two good children, listen to me carefully. Yuwen Huaji has received serious injury, he must immediately seek treatment, before a year or a half, don’t even think to recover. Therefore, in the end Niang has saved you!”

The two boys cried out together, “Niang, why don’t you heal first?”

Fu Junchuo sadly shook her head and said, “Niang also wish very much to spend more time to train you to become men who are worthy of respect, to see you get married and have children. I never thought that although I have always hated Han people, but when I saw you I have completely forgotten my country’s animosity and my family’s hatred, and was most willing to have you as my children. Niang has just stabbed Yuwen Huaji with a deadly strike, but I also received his full-strength punch. His Mysterious Ice Energy is indeed a well-deserved reputation, plus Yuwen Huaji himself is the most outstanding martial art expert in his Clan under Yuwen Shang. With Niang’s hopeless condition, even if Shifu personally took care of me, he could not save me. After Niang is dead, you may bury me here. Niang has always enjoyed solitude, later on you don’t need to visit me.”
[Translator’s note: the last sentence refers to religious rites people pay respects to their dead ancestors.]

How could the two boys endure it? They burst into loud wailing

while embracing Fu Junchuo with all their strength, until the front part of her gown was drenched with their tears.

Fu Junchuo maintained a serene expression; she said in tender voice, “Niang came all the way from Gaoli this time with bad intentions, my mission was to assassinate Yang Guang so that he can’t send troops to Gaoli in the future; who would have thought that the martial art masters in the Palace are as numerous as the clouds. It was only relying on my qinggong [lightness skill] that both times I was able to escape. Consequently, I changed plan. Using the treasure I found from Duke Yang’s treasure trove, I made appearance in Jianghu, inciting your Han people to massacre one another. But by chance I came across you.”

Right this moment the two boys were only concerned over Fu Junchuo’s life and death, they were not the slightest bit interested in any Duke Yang’s treasure-trove.

Fu Junchuo tenderly stroke their hair as she continued, “I went to Yangzhou to look for Shi Long, precisely because our informer within Yuwen Huaji’s men reported that Yang Guang sent him to find Shi Long, hence I came to investigate. As a result I met my two well-behaved darlings. Alright, Niang cannot hold on much longer. I still have a lot to say, but recalling how the Heaven often mess with people, saying it is as good as not saying it. I don’t know if it is because at the death door people become especially astute, but Niang suddenly have a feeling that in the future my two sons will not become mere ordinary men. You two must not

let Niang down!”

The two boys looked up mournfully and cried in grief, “Niang! How could you leave us like this?”

Fu Junchuo suddenly called out, “Oh! That treasure-trove is in Yuema Bridge [lit. galloping horse] in the Capital ...” Her voice suddenly ceased. Fu Junchuo, like a fallen jade or vanishing fragrance, in her youthful radiance, closed her eyes and passed away.

The two boys embraced the only family they had on earth, they wept until they lost consciousness.

Using the sword Fu Junchuo left behind, the two boys pared some trees to make planks, they managed to make an extremely simple and crude coffin. And then they buried Fu Junchuo in a clearing among the trees, with only her sword to accompany her.

They missed Fu Junchuo very much, while knowing that this deep enmity could not be avenged no matter what. In their inconsolable grief, their actions were a complete opposite of their normal state, they stayed all day next to the grave, and no longer interested in any rank, fame or fortune of the outside world. Even most talkative Kou Zhong suddenly became silent, he no longer talk.

Making primitive bow and arrow and spear, they caught fish in the river and hunted birds and beasts in the forest to allay their hunger. They even shed their clothes and together with their silver, bury it well. Just wearing shorts they lived a primitive life, devouring raw meat and fowl. Fortunately it was already the transition from spring to summer that in the south the weather was blisteringly hot, plus the two boys had healthy bodies so that they did not suffer any illness due to wind chill.

When night came they simply slept by the grave. They had the book 'Secret to Long Life' hidden underneath the rock they used as the tombstone; neither one was interested in even touching it.

That night when Fu Junchuo taught them the essence of Nine Mysteries Skill, she has not taught them how to do it when Yuwen Huaji came. Hence presently they only knew the essence, the locations of the acupoints, and the posture that they should assume in meditation; as for how to start practicing, they did not have the slightest idea. On top of that, in their hearts they wished they were dead; how could they have any mood to train? So every day they passed their days in daze, scorched by the sun and drenched by the rain, as if they did not know and did not even feel it.

One particular night, there was a heavy rain. It was cold outside, the two of them huddled together, their hearts were filled with endless misery; recalling Fu Junchuo who was buried right next to them, they wept silently.

When the cold was getting really unbearable, Kou Zhong pushed Xu Ziling to sit up; with his teeth chattering he said, “If we continue like this, sooner or later we will get sick, how could we fulfill Niang’s expectation then?”

In the past ten days or so, it was the first time that they talked.

Xu Ziling finally could not endure the cold; he clenched his teeth and asked, “What crafty idea do you have in mind?”

With a bitter smile Kou Zhong said, “If we did not bury Niang’s sword, we could at least build a tree house.”

Xu Ziling replied, “Even if I have to freeze to death, I won’t disturb Niang’s peace.”

Kou Zhong nodded his agreement. “That’s only natural,” he said, “But we’d better try practicing the meditation technique Niang taught us. Martial art master won’t be affected by heat and cold.”

“How do we start?” Xu Ziling dejectedly said.

Kou Zhong was speechless. He reached out to hold Xu Ziling, and that was how they endured the cold together until daybreak.

When the sun came out, the two boys slowly recovered. However, misfortune does not come singly; they have caught almost all the big fish in the creek that barely any was left. Birds and beasts also seemed to realize that they were dangerous, so none left in the valley. With no alternative, the two eventually decided to hunt for food outside the valley.

Taking their bow and arrow, they stepped out of the valley, only to see clusters of wild flowers, luxuriant fragrant grass, hills and plains, and the quiet open sky above. As far as their eyes could see, they did not see a single sign of other human beings. In all directions they were surrounded by bluish-green, dense mountain range; they could not stop their spirit from being roused, the grief loading their mind was considerably lightened.

Following the foot of the mountain the two boys searched for traces of their prey. Soon they had the luck of hitting a wild rabbit. In high spirits they returned to the valley.

Because it was a blisteringly hot day, Xu Ziling went to have a dip in the creek. When he returned to the grave, he saw Kou Zhong unexpectedly took the book 'Secret to Long Life' that was hidden underneath the tombstone out, and was reading it with rapt attention; he could not refrain from glaring at him. After all, if not for this 'Secret to Long Life', Fu Junchuo would not have died under Yuwen Huaji's hands.

Kou Zhong beckoned him to come over. “Don’t get angry at me,” he said, “I am simply following Niang’s order, we must keep on living. Although these human figures are not any divine skill training method, at the very least it is a training instruction to prolong life. Although we can’t figure out these ghost hunting-like characters on the drawings, we can at least follow the dotted lines on the diagrams to circulate our qi, according to the theory Niang taught us, and the positions of the channels and acupoints. If we can reap a bit of benefit, then we won’t have to freeze to death.”

When Xu Ziling was about to argue, Kou Zhong suddenly threw the book to his face as if it was an ordinary, worthless book. Naturally Xu Ziling caught it. The opened page happened to show a picture of a human lying down. When he looked at the drawing in the past, because he did not know the Eight Extraordinary Channels, it was as if he was looking at a meaningless drawing. But as he looked at it now, he suddenly understood it much better. Unexpectedly his eyes were glued to the diagram, and he was deeply attracted to it.

Kou Zhong shouted, “The sixth diagram is the most useful. It is best if you don’t look at other pictures first.”

Xu Ziling turned the pages, and found out that the picture he was looking at was the last diagram. Looking at the sixth picture, it did not seem to be any easier than the seventh diagram, so he simply ignored Kou Zhong and sat down to study the last diagram.

From that day onwards, other than hunting and sleeping, the two boys sat in meditation to practice following the diagram that they picked, living carefree without any worries in nature, thoroughly lived a primitive life.

Perhaps due to their single-mindedness in studying, the sorrow in their hearts was also vanishing with each passing day. Without even thinking about it, they have entered the 'ten-thousand thoughts reduction' realm that was the requirement in the Nine Mysteries training.

Another Long Journey

In the following eight days, the two boys practiced separately. Sometimes they did not even go hunting, they simply picked some wild fruits to fill their stomach.

The diagram Kou Zhong trained was the one depicting a walking man, where the channels and acupoints were marked in red dots and dotted lines. It was not much different from the one Xu Ziling practiced, but the pattern the qi traveled was completely opposite. It seemed to originate with a bold black arrow pointing to the Tian Ling [lit. heaven's spirit] acupoint at the top of the head. And from this the arrow split into red, orange, yellow, green, blackish green, blue and purple, seven colors. Each color seemed to indicate a completely different method. Not only the route was different, the acupoints it pointed to were also substantially different. Practically there were a lot of channels and acupoints that Fu Junchuo had not even mentioned, or perhaps she did mention it, but it was totally unrelated to the method of training she taught.

The diagram Xu Ziling picked was the lying man. The bold black

arrow was pointing to the Yong Quan [gushing spring] acupoint on the right foot. The seven-color arrows finally merged into the Yong Quan acupoint on the left foot, unlike Kou Zhong's diagram in which the lines returned to the Tian Ling acupoint. But the complexity of the two diagrams was more or less similar.

In their hearts the two boys did not expect anything, they had nothing else to do anyway, so they simply followed the theory their Niang taught them. With single-mindedness, their thought involuntarily followed the channels and acupoints that they already memorized well, and thus in the end, whether intentionally or not, they were actually going deep into the Nine Mysteries Great Method training.

Sometimes they practice following the red arrow, sometimes they followed different color. Although there was no immediate effect, the two of them did not mind too much.

Later on, Kou Zhong would suddenly get up from his sleep and, with his eyes still closed, walked around the valley according to the posture shown on the picture. And Xu Ziling would only feel comfortable if he lay down according to the posture shown on his picture. One moving and the other still, each with his own interest.

On the evening of the ninth day, there was a sudden thunderstorm; the two boys were unable to sleep, they were

compelled to practice. As usual, Kou Zhong wandered around the valley, Xu Ziling went to soak in the creek, with only his head above the water. Both were training their respective skill.

Not long afterwards, they both entered the peculiar state of 'no-self', where they seemed to be asleep, but were not actually asleep, and seemed to be awake, but not quite awake. In their mind suddenly there was the picture that they knew so well from the 'Secret to Long Life'. Furthermore, they no longer care about following any particular arrow, they simply entered the state of emptiness where their spirit was fixed on certain hard-to-describe phase.

Amazing things happened.

First it was Xu Ziling who suddenly felt his heart was burning, the hot burning feeling like he was on fire. And then the heat reached its peak, linked in countless ways it spilled onto all channels and acupoints, big and small. This kind of feeling was so unbearable that he nearly wanted to kill himself to end the pain. It was fortunate that the ice-cold creek water and the rainwater slightly alleviate his pain.

It was fortunate that Xu Ziling was smart that he knew that it was the moment his spirit and mind aroused, so he no longer paid attention to the pain in his body, he also ignored the arbitrary rushing and random surge of the 'real qi' within him. He was deep

in meditation, focusing his mind on only one thing.

It was also fortunate that Fu Junchuo did not have time to tell him the condition concerning the unleashing of qi.

If the movement of qi was due to regular Nine Mysteries Great Method training, the heat may start at the lower extremity of the backbone, and then following the arteries and veins, it would flow upward, breaking through Yu Zhen Guan [jade pillow pass], via Ni Jiu [mud/clay nine], and then returned to Ren channels [see Eight Extraordinary Channels, Chapter 7] at the front. This cycle continued ceaselessly for thirty-six days and became the basic method.

For average martial art practitioners, this is the state where they yearn for even in their dreams, because from this state they would embark on the path to become masters in internal strength.

Xu Ziling's situation was actually unprecedented. Average people would think that they were having fire deviation; if the fire deviation was mild, they would be paralyzed, if it were heavy their pulse and channels would rupture and they would perish. Hence when Shi Long tried to follow the diagram the other day, because he already had a preconceived idea, as soon as he felt something was not right, he stopped immediately and did not dare to continue.

Xu Ziling, on the other hand, had no idea what was going on, and thought that it ought to happen this way; under no apprehensions, the dead horse has become a living horse, and he obtained the real essence of the diagram instead.

Kou Zhong was under different situation. A burst of incomparably strange cold qi penetrated the top of his head and flowed into all channels and acupoints, big and small. The cold was so intense that he nearly froze to death; automatically he started to run to keep the qi and blood flowing freely.

And thus the two of them overcame their respective adversity this way for two sichen [i.e. 4 hours] until daybreak. Kou Zhong eventually could not endure anymore and collapsed on the ground. In this terrible moment, the channels in his entire body seemed to burst open at once and he lost consciousness.

Xu Ziling felt that the tidal wave of heat that nearly burned him to death was rapidly subsiding; momentarily he felt like he was falling into nothingness and lost his consciousness as well.

By midday, the rain stopped and the sky was clear, the sun broke through the clouds and was shining brightly. Kou Zhong was the first to wake up; he felt his entire body was immerse in coolness and did not feel bothered by the burning sun at all. It was extremely comfortable.

Kou Zhong was still unsure of what was going on. Recalling last night's experience, he still had a lingering fear, and sat up in daze.

One look around and he was amazed.

The whole heaven and earth seemed to be a lot clearer. Not only the colors were a lot richer, a lot of minute details that he usually overlooked have also become clear. Even the subtle change in the way the wind blows that he usually missed failed to escape his acute hearing.

The strangest thing was that both the heaven and the earth, the stone, a single blade of grass, seemed to be connected to him as if they were alive, while he himself has become part of them; the two no longer became separate entities.

Kou Zhong was greatly surprised; he quietly pondered that after the qi was aroused, the world unexpectedly looked completely new. Right this moment, a surge of great delight rushed forth in his heart, making him sprang up immediately.

First of all, Kou Zhong remembered Xu Ziling. Shouting gleefully, he called out, "Xiao Ling, I finished the first level. Look! My body is a lot lighter, I can do somersault." After somersaulting twice, he ran up to find his good brother.

The fact is that even if we asked martial art master of this age,

great martial art scholar with extensive knowledge and experience, they may not know what kind of skill these two boys have trained. Even the author of the 'Secret to Long Life' may only return a blank stare looking at the two boys' present condition.

But the change in the two boys' physique was real. Only, speaking about real fight, unless their opponent was an ordinary disciple of ordinary school, it would not be hard to make them kneel and beg for mercy. However, if this trend continued, nobody could predict what kind of level these two boys would be able to reach.

Hearing his shout, Xu Ziling slowly woke up. Still floating on the water, he felt his body was comfortably warm, without the slightest bit of cold. Hurriedly he crawled up the bank, and was so shaken that he dropped on his knees in disbelief. Because he saw the world was twice as beautiful than before.

From that day onward, the two of them believed that they had reached the first level of the Nine Mysteries Great Method. But remembering the deep pain they experience that night, temporarily they did not dare to continue their training.

But then they could not stand having too much energy. As soon as they woke up in the morning, they went out to hunt, and did not go back to the valley until the sun set over the western hills.

However, no matter how tired they were, they only need to sleep and when they woke up, the fatigue immediately went away.

When they woke up that day, Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling toward Fu Junchuo's grave. "If we continue like this," he said, "Niang would not be happy. Much less she still wanted us to get married and have children, to do great things and not simply become ordinary men."

Xu Ziling was silent for half a day. Finally he nodded and said, "I am also thinking of going out there. It's just that although we have trained a bit of our school's skill, compared with real martial art master, the difference is still more than a li away. If we only become foot soldier, my conscience will not allow it. Niang was so formidable, no matter what we must not make her lose face."

Kou Zhong giggled and said, "Absolutely. Just like Niang said, Yuwen Huaji is determined to have the 'Secret to Long Life', he will never let us off. Perhaps he already has people make pictures of us and spread it around the country offering a reward for our capture. Hence we still need to lie low until the fuss dies down. It is actually best to stay here, but if we continue like this, we will definitely turn into savages."

"So what's your plan?" Xu Ziling asked.

Acting as if he had already planned ahead Kou Zhong said, "First

we must find a good place to bury the ‘Secret to Long Life’, and then we head south, try to find a city, countryside, county or town to stay and see if we can make a living there. After we know the situation better, we can proceed with our original big plan of joining a militia.”

For some reason Xu Ziling also wanted to go out very much. Thereupon they immediately paid their respect in front of Fu Junchuo’s grave, buried the ‘Secret to Long Life’, retrieved their clothes and put them on, bundled their silver well, and left this beautiful little secluded valley, which had made their hearts ached and their souls broken, which they would never forget forever.

By this time it was already autumn, the air was fresh and cool. The two boys were still young, they slowly recovered from the blow of Fu Junchuo’s tragic death; they were starting to talk and laugh more often. Furthermore, due to the early glimpse of martial art prowess they managed to acquire, their self-confidence enjoyed considerable boost.

After walking to the south for seven days, they came across a small village. There were only a dozen or so houses in this village, with only two or three had lantern lights, indicating that this village had suffered under the chaos of war, and that life was difficult, hence they had to save as much resources as possible. There was a tinge of regret in the two boys’ hearts for returning to civilization.

As they were walking toward the village, suddenly they heard a dog barking in the distance. Immediately several dogs responded, several large dogs were jostling with each other while slowly moving toward their direction. The two boys were inwardly scared so they were on guard. Fortunately a villager came out and shouted to disperse the dogs. He greeted them warmly and offered them lodging for the night.

The next morning they left some coins for the lodging. And after asking for clear direction to the nearest largest county-level town, they continued on their journey.

After walking another ten or so days, they reached a big town called Cui Shan [lit. bluish-green/green-jade mountain] at the western extremity of Zhejiang River, south of Xin'an County. It was a town of approximately two thousands households, located east of Poyang Lake [Jiangxi]. The residents looked rather prosperous, there were stone bridges and row upon row of houses with tiled roof; it was a typical thriving Jiangnan town. Although in term of size it was only about a quarter of Danyang, and it did not have high city walls, when the two boys saw the town, they both had a feeling that they wanted to live here.

They were most interested in how exquisite was the clothes the women in this town were wearing. Both the tailoring and the embroidery showed off these out-of-the-water countryside girls' skill and the way they paid particular attention to details.

What made the boys even happier was that these girls were wearing embroidered scarf draped over their upper arms, embroidered shoes on their feet, and thickly pleated skirt around their waists, making them appeared more graceful and vibrant, as they paraded ostentatiously around town in groups. Looking at the girls, the two boys' heart began to itch. Especially now that they had a few pennies in their pocket, unlike before, where they were just poor drifters; their mood was completely different, they walked with puffed chest.

The two boys found a small hotel that did not look too expensive, booked a small room, and then with much trepidation went to the town hall to scout around; if they saw their portraits in a wanted poster, they would immediately escape without a trace.

Most shops in town had their businesses at the front, and an alley at the back, with residences upstairs. Workshops and warehouses were built next to the water, to make full use of river transportation.

When they reached the town hall, they saw conscription announcement plastered on the wall, but there wasn't any wanted poster. The two boys were ecstatic; shouting for joy they strolled along the street like a pair of big bosses.

A group of young girls were walking straight toward them,

laughing and giggling. When they saw the two boys' amazing appearance, imposing physique and lofty expression, their eyebrows rose and their eyes showed admiration. The two boys halted their steps while their heart was bursting with joy.

Ever since they were born, this was the first time the two boys received admiring look from the opposite sex; hence their confidence was highly boosted.

Actually, during their stay in the valley for the whole summer, due to constant movement and first-class martial art training they underwent, plus it was the time when their bodies underwent growth spurt, not only they now looked tall and sturdy, the most noticeable change was their countenance; they both now exuded some kind of hard-to-explain youthful charm.

Very quickly the two boys were drawn into the familiarity of water-front town people; they thought that if they had to stay here, get married and have children, probably it was not a bad thing.

When they were in Yangzhou, the reason they developed fantasy and lofty aspiration all day long was because they were dissatisfied with their current situation, and because they were bullied and humiliated often. Now that they had found this Garden-of-the-Peaches-of-Immortality like place, where the people seemed simple and honest, they felt something new and

fresh; thereupon they changed their mind and no longer had the intention to join the militia.

Kou Zhong caught a glimpse of a large signboard, 'Liu Chun Courtyard' [lit. preserving spring]; he pulled Xu Ziling's broad shoulder and winked, "Xiao Ling," he said, "You are more or less sixteen, and soon I will be seventeen. Other men get married when they are fourteen years old, but until today we are still virgin ..."

Xu Ziling impatiently cut him off, "I understand what you mean. We have money, and you, this fellow, itch all over your body; isn't that it? I am not opposed taking some money and waste it on some eye-opening activity at all, but at least we should wait until we find a job, find a place to stay, and then we can explore this life of pleasure seeking. Besides, isn't the money left by Niang as our capital? It is enough for us to build a rather decent, simple house, plus to run a small shop; it must not be spent rashly on some extravagant thing."

Seeing he did not really oppose the idea, Kou Zhong happily said, "Naturally, let us have a big feast first, and then we'll go around to see what kind of work needs manpower."

By this time they happened to stand in front of a restaurant. They were just about to enter when a big man, as sturdy as an ox, suddenly stormed out like a tornado, carrying a bundle in his

hand. He turned to the left and gone. A short, skinny old man ran after him, shouting that man's name. But the man did not even look back, he simply left without saying anything. The short, skinny man sat down dejectedly, leaning against the door to the restaurant, while cursing ferociously.

The two boys were baffled. They were just about to step in, the old man shrieked, "We are closed today, we will be closed tomorrow and thereafter."

They began to realize that this man was the owner of this restaurant; looking at him covered all over with grease, they also realized that he was the chef as well. Kou Zhong was most curious; he asked, "Why won't you open hereafter?"

The old man looked at the two boys from top to bottom once, and then with a bored grunt he said, "That prodigal son has left, my woman also passed away last month, how can I run this big shop alone?" Hanging his head down, he sighed and said, "Speaking about culinary skill, if I, Ol' Zhang, am considered number two, who would dare to say that he is number one? Any dumpling oil rice, cool-breeze rice, jade-well rice [I have no idea what these are: 团油饭、清风饭、玉井饭], which one I, the Ol' Zhang, am not an expert at? But that prodigal son did not understand and did not want to inherit my consummate skill, all day long he is nagging about joining the army and setting up merit. Just you see, when the day comes that he become a beggar and return home, I won't support him! Humph, I might as well

return to my village so that even if he wanted to find me he couldn't."

The two boys exchanged a glance and both squatted down. Kou Zhong said, "That's too bad, such a big restaurant is closing its door. You'd better hire us as your helpers, and at the same time, your apprentice, so that your, Master Zhang, consummate skill will not extinct. At most we only want you to pay us two hundred five zhu coins [see Chapter 50] each month."

The Ol' Zhang was stunned; he looked at them again, from top to bottom, and then after a while he curiously asked, "Who are you?"

After Kou Zhong told him some made-up story, the Ol' Zhang said, "So it's twenty strings of coins altogether?"

Each string is ten coins, twenty strings are precisely two hundred coins. Even for one person, it could be considered an unusually meager pay; now that two persons only received two hundred coins, it was excessively too harsh. No wonder even Ol' Zhang's son wanted to leave.

Kou Zhong wanted to learn his rice cooking skill, so that in the future he could make a living. But he was also proficient in scheming; therefore, without giving it a second thought he said, "In that case you must also guarantee our food and lodging."

Narrowing his eyes, Ol' Zhang spoke in a strange voice, "Guaranteeing your food and lodging is not a problem, but all cleaning and menial jobs will also be your responsibility."

Kou Zhong laughed, "It's a deal!" he said, "Right now we are extremely hungry, naturally this meal will be on Boss Zhang's account."

And so the two boys moved in to the room upstairs that was vacant due to Ol' Zhang's son's leaving. Every day before dawn they woke up and started to work. Every afternoon when the Ol' Zhang closed the shop to take a nap, the two boys were responsible to purchase supplies and receive deliveries. After they closed for the night, Ol' Zhang took a bath and went to bed, they washed the dishes and cleaned up.

With such an extremely busy life, not only they did not have time to visit pleasure house for some eye-opening activity, they did not even have enough time to sleep.

But Ol' Zhang did indeed have true culinary skill; not only he was famous locally, even traveling merchants who passed by the town took pleasure in visiting the restaurant.

The menu only consisted of three types of rice, the ones that Ol' Zhang mentioned earlier, *i.e.* dumpling oil rice, cool-breeze

rice, and jade-well rice. But Ol' Zhang's skill was not limited to only these. After having Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling to help him, from time to time he also received some catering order, people who showed up at their door to have a gathering.

Since the two boys intentionally wanted to steal his skill, plus the Ol' Zhang was old and weak and thus in day-to-day operation he relied heavily on them, bit by bit he passed on his culinary skill to them.

Three months later, they were brimming with confidence; they believed that they could spread their wings on their own. While on the other hand they grew tired of this business.

The reason they hesitated over what move to make, and did not make up their mind to leave, was because they did not want to abandon Ol' Zhang, for fear that he could not stand it.

That night, after the shop closed, while Ol' Zhang already went upstairs, the two boys had serious discussion.

"Have we made decision not to join the militia, or perhaps to become Wulin masters?" Kou Zhong asked.

Xu Ziling sprawled himself on the chair; he sighed and said, "Being busy like this every day until the sky turned dark and the earth black, so that we don't have time to enjoy life, does not

seem to be quite interesting.”

Kou Zhong said, “How about we endure it some more? Let’s stay here three more months, after the end of the year and the spring equinox [4th of the solar terms, March 21 – April 4], when the weather is warm, we’ll get out of here.”

Xu Ziling was distressed, “But I am a bit reluctant to leave,” he said.

With a wry smile Kou Zhong said, “Me too. But I have an idea, it is called ‘a real man aspires to travel far and make his mark in the world’. Why don’t we take refuge in the Song Family of Hunan? That Song Lu did not treat us too shabbily, if we could do obeisance and take him as our master, perhaps we can really accomplish our dreams.”

And then, gnashing his teeth he said, “If I can master martial art skill, the first thing I do is to kill that traitor Yuwen Huaji.”

Upset, Xu Ziling said, “Last night I dreamt about Niang again, she blamed me for not having a backbone, for not having guts to avenge her.”

Kou Zhong blew a long breath, “We are indeed too timid,” he resolutely said, “We can’t be considered real men. The worst that can happen is we die. Yet these days we are afraid the hard work

of training martial art, we are also afraid of fire-deviation, hence we do not dare to continue. How is it not letting Niang down? I decided that starting tomorrow, I am turning over a new leaf, I will start training again, and in the future, I will not give up before I kill Yuwen Huaji.”

Xu Ziling’s eyes suddenly flashed with unprecedented sharpness as he stretched out his hand to grab Kou Zhong’s and said, “It’s good that you have made up your mind, I support it with my entire being. Back in Yangzhou our ambition was higher than the heavens; how did we become people who refuse to face reality [orig. shrink the head like a turtle]? We’d better leave tomorrow.”

Kou Zhong was amazed, “How did your eyes suddenly lit up just now? Just like Niang’s eyes just before she died.”

Xu Ziling was dumbstruck for half a day; he mused, “Truth be told, although I did not intentionally practice, every night when I lie down, that diagram showing how to circulate the qi appeared clearly in my mind, and thus I followed it automatically.”

Kou Zhong regretfully said, “If I had known earlier, I would have followed your example, diligently and relentlessly trained well. After this I definitely cannot stay idle. Alright! We will be on our way tomorrow.”

Xu Ziling muttered to himself, “Who will tell Ol’ Zhang?”

With a wry smile Kou Zhong replied, “Let’s do it together. This miserly crafty old man ought to receive a bit of lesson as well.

Dashing On Bravely With No Thought Of Personal Safety

When the sky was still dark early the next morning, the two boys slung their bundles over their shoulders and set off on another journey.

It was precisely this sudden decision that would change their destiny. Not only theirs, but the Wulin's as well as the world's [tian xia] destiny.

Their destination was the Great Sui Dynasty's eastern capital, Luoyang.

That day Song Lu said that after their business in Sichuan was done, they would go to Luoyang to look for the legendary Jade Annulus of the He Clan. Since it was not something that could be accomplished in ten days or half a month, although it was already half a year ago, they were still thinking of going to Luoyang to try their luck, to see if they could still come across Song Lu.

The closer they got to Yangtze River, the more they felt the oppression and chaos of war. Along the way, from time to time they met groups of refugees. When asked, nobody could give them clear answer as to whom they were fleeing from; these people could not even tell the difference between Sui army and the rebels' army.

One day they arrived at a small county town, and found a small hotel that was not busy. They slept until midnight when suddenly the street was like a boiling cauldron of voices, a total chaos. Realizing that something was amiss, the two boys hurriedly packed their bundles and rushed downstairs. Pulling aside another guest that was just about to run outside, they inquired of what was going on.

The man replied, "Du Fuwei crushed Sui army at Dongleng occupied Liyang. It's just that nobody expected to see his army coming this soon." Finished speaking, he ran away in fear.

The two boys were surprised that Liyang would fall this soon, which means their plan of going up north by boat to Liyang was disrupted.

When they got to the street, they saw people and carriages were fighting over the road, everybody was scrambling to escape to the south; people were screaming and calling out their child and their mothers, the cries of grief shook the heavens. Although

the two boys' courage was above average, at the end of the day, they were still big kids. Infected by this kind of terrible dooms-day-is-coming atmosphere, immediately their minds were on chaos, so they blindly followed the stream of people leaving the city.

The road was littered with clothes, furniture, household utensils, shoes, everything, that people simply abandoned; evidently the situation was extremely dire. The two boys were holding on to each other with dear life, afraid that they might get separated by this tidal wave of people.

Once they were outside the city, they saw covering the mountains and the plains were lanterns and torches of the people fleeing the war. They could not believe that such a small county town, which streets ordinarily were sparsely travelled, all of a sudden could produce these many people.

Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling aside to go to different direction, following another road away from the crowd. He said in subdued voice, "We still want to go north, worst case scenario it won't be via Liyang."

Xu Ziling nodded, "We should," he agreed, "We'll just have to be a bit more careful."

The two boys turned; winding around the town, they

proceeded to the north.

After leaving Cui Shan, this was the first time they traveled at night. To their surprise, they found out that under the faint starlight, they could still see the road clearly.

After walking for several hours, they saw blazing fire filling the whole sky ahead, and they heard shouting and killing noise. Panicked, the two boys ran without looking where they were going. They took a long detour, and because of this, they completely lost their sense of direction.

By daybreak they reached a small village. While they were thinking of asking for directions, suddenly they heard the sound of hoof beats. A group of riders were charging toward their direction from the hillside. The two boys were shocked, and quickly hid inside nearby bushes.

There were about sixty riders. But looking at their all mixed up and chaotic warrior outfits, it was clear that they were rebels' army. Everyone had a green cloth tied on their arms. As soon as they entered the village, they shot dead several dogs that ran out toward them; and then they went from house to house to search, dragging several hundred villagers, men, women, young and old, out of their homes. In that instant chickens flew out and dogs ran away, parents called for their children and children cried out for their mother. The sound of wailing shook the heavens, making

the two boys could not bear to watch much longer.

If they had matchless martial art skill, by this time they would have gone out to uphold justice. But they also remembered that even a tyrannical man with superb martial art skill, who ran amuck in the world such as Chu's Overlord Xiang Yu[1], still required coordination and all kinds of favorable factors before he ended up cutting his own throat at Wu Jiang [lit. Black River]. In this turbulent time, the power of a single person was negligible.

The green cloth army divided the men and women into two separate rows, which were surrounded all around, to prevent anybody from escaping.

It was only then that the two boys understood why upon hearing the rebel army approaching, the entire city immediately fled clean. Tragic was the fate of these villagers who heard the news but waited here, who, until the troops entered their village they still did not know what was going on.

The two boys had never seen such troops movement; seeing how those saber-wielding, halberd-holding militia troops look fierce and ruthless as if they are ready to kill without blinking an eye, they did not even dare to breath too loud. Especially the closest militia troop was only about fifty steps away from their hiding place; it was indeed extremely dangerous.

One of the riders, who seemed to be the rebel leader, flanked by four escorts, urged his mount toward the row of village men. He picked several healthy, robust men, and drove them to the side, where some other riders immediately tied them with ropes. They appeared extremely harsh, brutal and inhuman. Anybody dared to resist, instantly horsewhip lashed down, beating him until he was half dead.

Watching the scene, the two boys' faces turned green and their lips white, but their hearts were boiling with anger.

As those mothers and wives saw their sons and husbands being dragged away to be forced labor, they wailed and cried out miserably that those who hear it could not bear it anymore. But those so-called 'righteous army' maintained their fierce expression, without showing the least bit of compassion.

[Translator's note: the word 'volunteer army' or 'militia' consist of two characters 义军 – yi jun, the first character literally means 'righteous'.]

Finished selecting the men, the leader went through the womenfolk and the children. Suddenly he pulled the reins. Pointing toward the crowd with his horsewhip, he barked, "You, come out!"

It immediately provoked uproar among the villagers, which the

rebels army quickly quenched, naturally not without several people fell down in injuries.

Watching this, Kou Zhong, two boys' eyes were bloodshot with fury, but they knew that if they stepped forward bravely right now, they would suffer the same fate. It was this moment that they knew that their idea of joining the militia was a very ignorant and naïve.

The village woman was dragged out, sure enough, she looked rather pretty, with a well-developed figure; no wonder the rebel leader's heart was moved.

While the rebel leader was laughing lecherously, from the side a young militia soldier coldly said, "Qi Laoda [boss, see Chapter 1], Du Zongguan [chief manager, also Chapter 1] has an order, we must not rape women. Qi Laoda right now is at the edge of a cliff, reining your horse; there's still time."

This man was brimming with righteousness, and he dared to confront his superior. The two boys were surprised that there was such man in the rebel army; in their hearts they cheered for him.

With a cold snort Qi Laoda said, "Li Jing[2], you mind your own business. Am I raping any woman now? I want to bring this pretty woman back home and marry her legally, making her my official

wife. Ha! Do you think Du Ye [master Du] will also manage my marriage?” [reminder: ‘guan’ of Zongguan above means ‘manage’]

Li Jing was about to reply, the village woman suddenly bit the back of the green-cloth soldier’s hand. The green-cloth soldier was startled and let go his grip. With the strength that nobody knew where it came from, the woman dashed out wildly from the encirclement, and ran toward the direction where Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were hiding.

Immediately four green-cloth soldiers laughed and cursed while urging their horses to give chase.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling saw the fear in the village woman’s pretty eyes, their hearts swelled with righteous indignation. Forgetting about their own safety, they picked stones from the ground, jumped out of their hiding place, and threw the stones at the green-cloth soldiers pursuing the village woman.

When they were still at Yangzhou, their most formidable martial art skill was throwing rocks. It is called with a lot of work, the art is perfected, their throw has become accurate. This time they made their move without hesitation, also it was a sudden attack that was not anticipated, two of the green-cloth soldiers were hit at the pit of their stomach and fell down from their horses.

By this time the village woman's strength was finally exhausted, she tumbled down on the ground.

Kou Zhong suddenly felt his entire body was full of energy, the true qi inside him was surging, he felt as if he could beat two tigers to death, the strength with which he threw the rock was also doubled. With great excitement he called out, "Xiao Ling, snatch the horse and save her."

The stones were thrown in rapid succession. Two other green-cloth soldiers were about to shoot with their arrows when suddenly their cheeks were hit. With a miserable cry they fell to the ground.

Hoof beats thundered as the rest of the green-cloth soldiers swarmed down to them.

In the meantime Xu Ziling has already pulled the village woman up. While he was worrying about how to ride a horse, he saw the crowd of soldiers was closing in. In his panic, he forgot that he did not know martial art; hastily he rushed forward toward a warhorse, while still dragging the village woman, who seemed to be as light as nothing, he leaped onto the horseback. To his surprise, he easily landed steadily on the saddle.

This moment Kou Zhong already jumped onto another horse. He clamped his legs on the horse's belly, but the horse reared on

its hind legs and threw him down on the ground.

Xu Ziling's horse was also going around in circles, he was unable to make the horse run or even move forward. The green-cloth soldiers were only about twenty steps away. The several soldiers at the front have already prepared their bows and arrows, but they were afraid of hurting the horse, hence they did not shoot.

“Zhong Shao(ye),” Xu Ziling called out, “Come quickly.”

Kou Zhong was at his wits' end; hearing the call, he dashed madly and unexpectedly leaped high in the air and landed on Xu Ziling's horseback. Wrapping his arms around Xu Ziling's waist, he shouted, “Let's go!”

[1] Xiang Yu the Conqueror (232-202 BC), warlord defeated by the first Han emperor.

[2] There was a real historical character Li Jing (570-649AD), Tang Dynasty general and purported author of ‘Duke Li of Wei Answering Emperor Taizong of Tang’, one of the ‘Seven Military Classics’ of ancient China; not sure if this Li Jing was the same one. I guess we'll have to wait to find out.

In this critical moment, where one can have his black hair turns white, the village woman suddenly took over the reins, and then

with a shout her tiny feet kicked on the horse's belly. The horse neighed wildly and dashed forward like an arrow, carrying the three people on its back.

They saw that very soon they were about to enter a wooded area; who would have thought that there was a dirt path inside the woods? Turning to the left and winding to the right, in a flash they saw the thief soldiers were left far behind on this unfamiliar road.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling cheered in their rather strange voice. The latter suddenly remembered that he was still embracing a stranger's, the unfamiliar woman's fragrant and soft body.

The good-looking, capable woman not only had consummate equestrian skill, she was also familiar with the local terrain like the back of her hand. Going into the woods, passing through the open fields, climbing mounds, going down the hills, wading the creeks, ascending the mountains, the pursuing enemy's voice gradually quieted down.

When the three people were happy, the warhorse suddenly stumbled, throwing them into the underbrush in an unsightly heap. While they were crawling to get up, the village woman suddenly cried out in alarm and covered up her chest in panic. Turned out her clothes caught on something and was ripped, exposing a large part of her snow-white breasts. The two boys

were frightened and busily turning their body around.

Noticing that she was about three, four cun [an inch, a thumb] shorter than they were, Kou Zhong tossed his bundle to her and said, “All clothes are clean, pick one and put it on, we won’t peek.”

Rustling noise ensued. Soon after the village woman’s bashful voice was heard, “I’m done!”

The two boys turned around and were momentarily stunned; both thought that unexpectedly she was so pretty.

The village woman was about twenty, her eyes were deep black, her skin was unusually fair. Wearing men’s clothing, she exuded some kind of spirited charm.

The village woman beckoned to them and said in low voice, “Follow me.”

The two boys looked at the foamy-mouth, about-to-die warhorse; they sighed inwardly, and dejectedly followed the village woman. After walking for about half a sichen, the village woman led them into a secluded cave on the mountain.

As the two boys sat down, the village woman said with her head hung low, “Thank you two heroes [the word here is ‘hao han’ –

strong and courageous man] for offering help from a sense of justice. Xiao Nuzi [little/lowly woman] is extremely grateful.”

Addressed by her as ‘heroes’, the two boys were elated that they felt they were high in the clouds; while at the same time they were surprised, because not only this woman did not look like a village woman, from the way she talked, it did not appear like she grew up in some remote and desolate place.

The pretty village woman saw the two boys were staring at her with their big eyes, with a doubtful expression on their faces, and then she realized that although these two look tall and sturdy, they were in fact still big boys who were younger than she was, whose faces still looked naïve and childish. Involuntarily the bashfulness and fear in her heart subsided considerably.

“Nu jia [lit. servant/slave; yet another word for lowly woman, referring to self] is called Susu,” she said softly, “Really isn’t a Pujia Village resident, it’s just that I got separated from my master that I fled to this place and received Pujia Village people’s kindness in offering shelter to me!”

Relieved, Kou Zhong said, “Susu Jiejie [older sister, term of endearment] is so pretty, it doesn’t matter whether it was kindness or ill-intention, I am sure a lot of people will scramble to offer you shelter.”

Susu's pretty face blushed as she protested, "It's not like that!"

Seeing Kou Zhong was starting to flirt, Xu Ziling gave him a rebuking stare as he asked, "How long have Jiejie lived there? How did you become so familiar with this area?"

Kou Zhong added with a laugh, "Jiejie's equestrian skill is so formidable."

The two boys were used to be despised and scorned by others, so if anybody was a bit kind to them, they were easily touched. And now suddenly there was this pretty older sister who regarded them as hero [now the word is 'ying xiong' – hero], it was obvious that they felt a novel excitement. Yet for some unknown reason, Susu's pretty face blushed even deeper.

"I only lived in Pujia Village for a month," she whispered, "But I have come with the villagers to go hunting in this area. As for equestrian skill, why, it was my master's Miss who taught me. Don't the two of you know how to ride?"

The two boys were greatly embarrassed. Inwardly they thought how could there be any heroes [this time it's the combination of two: ying xiong hao han, which in English usually is being translated simply as 'heroes'] who didn't know how to ride?

Kou Zhong cleared his throat, and then, not even dare to look

at her he asked, “Jiejie’s Miss, where does she live?”

Being called Jiejie this and Jiejie that by these two boys, Susu was also sighing in happiness in her heart. With a tender voice she said, “My Miss is Zhai Rang Laoye’s [old master] only daughter, Zhai Wuxia [FYI, her name means ‘without flaw’]. That day our troops were under surprise attack, in the confusion we got separated from each other. But my Miss has an outstanding martial art skill, so she should be alright. Now I ought to return to Rongyang.”

The two boys were moved immediately. These past three months when they worked at the restaurant, everyday they heard all kinds of news and rumor from the traveling merchants. One of the often-mentioned information was precisely about Zhai Rang and his top general Li Mi. Zhai Rang was known as ‘Great Dragon Head’ [i.e. big boss], the leader of the Wa Gang army. Six years ago, along with his subordinate, another valiant general Xu Shiji, rose up in rebellion at Fort Wa Gang, seizing that territory and proclaimed himself king. Time and again they defeated the Sui army, but was then subdued by Sui general Zhang Xutuo, and since then he was unable to expand his influence anymore.

Last year, Li Mi threw his lot with Zhai Rang, thus doubling Zhai Rang’s strength. Li Mi attacked and crushed Sui army at Dahai Temple [lit. big ocean] in Rongyang, in which battle Zhang Xutuo was killed. Since then Wa Gang army’s prowess was greatly flourishing, and implicitly became the chief of the world’s militias,

and thus by ‘men and horses of various paths’ he was honored as the ‘big boss’. Indeed he was not a nobody. It had not occurred to the two boys that the beautiful Jiejie was Zhai Rang’s daughter’s maid.

The astonished Kou Zhong asked, “Isn’t Rongyang lies about a hundred li east of the eastern capital Luoyang? It’s really far away from here. How did Jiejie end up here?”

Susu replied, “Miss wanted to go to Liyang to listen to the world’s number one talented lady Shang Xiufang’s singing; who would have thought that our itinerary was leaked out, and before reaching Liyang something bad happened. If not for Jiejie’s horse was fast, I would not have the fortune to come across you here.”

Unwittingly she also considered herself to be their Jiejie.

Just then, there was a light cough from the cave mouth.

The three people were greatly startled; they all looked to the cave mouth, and saw a tall, majestic looking, sturdy man of about twenty-three or twenty-four, was coming into the cave.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling sprang up, and both stood in front of Susu to shield her. Kou Zhong took a closer look, and his countenance fell, “Aren’t you the one they called Li Jing?”

The newcomer was indeed Li Jing who reprimanded the green-cloth army leader just now. He did not look handsome at all, but his countenance looked forthright, the bridge of his nose was high, his forehead wide, his eyes were sparkling with spirit, giving other people the impression of poise and resourcefulness.

Li Jing smiled, revealing two rows of white teeth, a strong contrast with his dark, rough complexion. He nodded in astonishment and said, "I am indeed Li Jing. This Xiao Xiongdi's vision is really formidable. At that time you and I were separated by at least a distance of 150 steps, unexpectedly you are able to recognize Ol' Li's appearance, so that in just one look you can call out my name correctly. But looking at your skill, you don't look like someone who had trained martial art. This is very strange."

The two boys trembled with fear inwardly. Just based on one sentence from Kou Zhong, he was able to deduce so many things. It was clear that he had vast knowledge, experience and wisdom.

From behind, Susu's trembling voice spoke up, "At most I'll come with hero [hao han] back, but you must not harm them."

Li Jing laughed aloud and said, "Just based on Miss' compassionate and righteous sentence, even if I, Li Jing, have to risk my life, I will definitely protect you. The three of you may set your heart at ease. I came here alone. That Qi Laoda has been shot to death by me, the Ol' Li. If that rapist, evil man were

allowed to live in this world, he might harm several more people.”

Looking at his posture and bearing, Kou Zhong knew that even he and Xu Ziling fought together, they were still not the opponent’s match; much less he was armed with long saber and bow and arrow. But he did say that he shot Qi Laoda to death, and he did say that he was going to protect them, so he had no reason to deceive them. Thereupon he relaxed his guard and said, “Li Dage [big brother], please sit down.”

Li Jing took off the bow and arrows on his back, and put down the saber on his waist before coming over and sat down in front of the three. After everybody was seated, he smiled and said, “I ought to arrive earlier, but because I had to erase your tracks first, I spent quite a bit of time.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other, they said with regret, “We did not think about that.”

Li Jing happily patted his shoulder, while raising the thumb of his other hand. “To see what is right and act courageously, to defy the strong, is the conduct of a real man,” he said, “Rarer still, you two are not fully grown men, yet you have this kind of guts, wisdom and skill. In the future, you will definitely be outstanding men.” And then turning to Susu he said, “Miss’ horsemanship is superb.”

Being praised by him, the three people were blushing, but they also grew favorable impression toward him.

Susu asked, "Could those green-cloth troops take their anger out on Pujia village people?"

Li Jing nonchalantly said, "That's the second reason I was late. I had to set those innocent villagers free. Killing Qi Laoda and those sidekicks and hunting dogs of his only took the time needed to drink several sip of hot tea."

Although Susu was glad, she was also aghast that he considered killing all those men as not a big deal.

Li Jing indifferently said, "Only by killing them I could seize their horses. But I only brought two horses, because I did not anticipate that Miss is not Pujia Village native. But now that I see Miss, I know that we are still one horse short."

Listening to him, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's hearts swelled with respect. This Li Jing was definitely a person of wisdom and valor; but they also could not help feeling a bit afraid of him.

After seizing the two boys up and down several times, Li Jing said in earnestness, "This is the period when the whole country is in rebellion. When armed troops are against each other, it's either you are dead or I perish. Those who are not vicious and merciless

enough will be wiped out. As long as we can see our goal clearly and fix our own principle, distinguishing thoroughly between right and wrong, black and white, friends or foe in righteousness, we will be able to face the heaven and the earth with clear conscience.”

The two boys nodded, indicating they accepted the instruction.

Susu asked, “Those you did not kill, could they still be looking for us?”

Li Jing smiled and said, “The most important thing for them is looking for me to settle the account. Although Du Fuwei’s fame for fighting prowess is great, he is not a good material for vying over the world [tian xia]. Not only he condones his men, he is greedy of short-term small benefit; he enlists people into his army by force, and thus provoking the heaven’s anger and the men’s blame, causing villages and towns to be abandoned. It’s really like drinking poison to quench thirst. I originally considered him as an important character, but now I can see everything clearly.”

Kou Zhong loved to talk about ‘militia matters’, too bad Xu Ziling was not too interested, so he did not have anybody to talk about it with. Right now he met Li Jing, someone with ‘inside information’, so he happily asked, “Li Dage, in your opinion, which rebel army is the most promising?”

Xu Ziling's thought was more thorough; recalling that Susu could be considered as Zhai Rang's people, he reminded him, "Zhong Shao, don't talk nonsense."

Li Jing noticed how Xu Ziling seemed to be incessantly making eye signals to Kou Zhong while referring to Susu; he was astonished and asked, "Which party does Miss belong to?"

Susu hurriedly told him about her past, and then said, "Xiao Bi [lowly maid servant/slave girl] has never been familiar with the matter of the world's great powers; you must not have any misgivings on account of me."

Apparently Li Jing had high respect toward Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling; he seriously said, "Looking at today's situation, although rebels army are everywhere, but those who can be considered excellent characters are not many. Right now the prime example of one with most fame and power is 'Great Dragon Head' Zhai Rang; however, Zhai Ye's [master] subordinate Great General Li Mi's fame and power is actually above his, plus he is extremely well-versed in military strategy and tactics. Hence the relationship between master and subordinate is not clear. This will bring trouble in the future."

Susu's countenance changed, "What should we do then?" she asked.

Li Jing grimly said, “If Miss will trust the Ol’ Li, from now on you need to distance yourself from the Zhai family, to avoid ‘the boat capsizes the people perish’ disaster in the future.”

Susu said in sad voice, “Since childhood Xiao Bi has been sold to the Zhai Family. At that time Laoye [old master] was still a court of law officer at Shujun [lit. Shu county(?)]. Later on because he killed the son of an influential official, he was condemned to death; hence he rose in rebellion and declared his independence. Not only that, Miss has always been treating me like a sister; how could I abandon her at this point?”

Kou Zhong was tongue-tied. He then said, “Turns out Zhai Rang is still considered the most formidable. But is Li Mi the most promising?”

Li Jing could not stop himself from laughing. “The way you use ‘most promising’ [zui you qian tu], these four characters are very interesting. I can see that in the future Xiao Xiongdi will become an eloquent orator. What you said is correct; not only Li Mi nowadays has several Wulin martial art masters under his command, he is skilled in the art of war and is able to move the troops like a deity, he is also a charismatic leader. In short, he is a figure with grand ambitions to win the world [orig. to inquire of the tripods]. Problem is, his rivals are simply too many. First and foremost are the Four Powerful Clans, who have a large number of talents within their ranks. They would not sit still watching the Sui’s world [tian xia] fall into someone of common family name.

Such powerful clans' opinion is deep-rooted; nobody can change it. Moreover, the biggest advantage of the Four Powerful Clans is that time and again the members of their Clan have held high positions in the imperial court, they are skillful in governing the country. This is something that ordinary citizens of mountain and fields who rise in rebellion cannot match. Du Fuwei is the best example. Even if his martial art skill is outstanding, it's difficult for him to accomplish big things."

The two boys remembered Yuwen Huaji immediately, their faces revealed deep hatred. Li Jing noticed this and asked in bewilderment, "Oh Li has not inquired two Xiao Xiongdi's names."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling knew that he has seen through the load in their mind, hence they thought that from their names, he could speculate their background. Xu Ziling then told him their names, and calmly added, "Yuwen Huaji killed our Niang, therefore, we want to look for him for revenge."

Naturally Li Jing could not figure out the twists and turns of this matter, he thought Yuwen Huaji really killed their Niang just like Yang Guang implicated a lot of common people, making family bankrupt and the people dead; that kind of tragedy.

And then Xu Ziling narrated to him thoroughly, and so he understood the details. He could not refrain from speaking solemnly, "Obviously the two Xiao Xiongdi have not entered the

world too deeply. There are rules that must be known before you started. Jianghu has a saying, 'Meeting people by chance, speak only three-tenth.' There are too many people who on the surface look reliable, but in certain situation may become an enemy. Every word you said could potentially become the cause of your demise."

The two boys nodded their head indicating they accepted the advice.

Susu was touched. "Li Dage is really good to them," she said.

Li Jing replied seriously, "Very few people can hit it off with the Ol' Li as soon as we meet; those who have dead hearts are unbearably many. There are a lot of things in the world that seem to be impossible, but can be done single-handedly by ambitious people. Commoners can be bestowed the title marquis or revered as prime minister, so much so that they can reach the top to the emperor's throne. People who have nothing at all also can become rich merchant wealthy tycoons. This kind of matter is not without any precedence, so you can greatly encourage yourselves with this."

Listening to this, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were radiant with delight. This conversation with Li Jing has been like encountering bright beacon light in the dark night at the angry sea; making them see hope and giving them goals to achieve, and reignited

the ambition that was hit hard by Fu Junchuo's death.

Li Jing continued, "Other than Zhai Rang and Li Mi, those with most fame and power are Wang Bo, Dou Jiande and Du Fuwei. These three top powers are the most, hey, the most promising."

Seeing a person with a lot of insight and vast experience like Li Jing was also willing to adopt his phrase, Kou Zhong was very proud of himself.

"Du Fuwei, you have already commented," he said, "Wang Bo and Dou Jiande, what's so formidable about these guys?"

"Pfft!" Susu broke into laughter as she spoke up, "How can you casually call people 'guys'?"

Smiling, Li Jing said, "Kou Xiao Xiong still has naiveté! Wang Bo is the number one master of the Chang Bai Sect, he is known in Wulin world as the 'Whip King', but he calls himself 'Zhi Shi Lang' [it's hard to translate succinctly, it basically means 'the minister/official/youth who understood the world/lifetime/era']. He composed the song 'Don't Go Toward Liaodong [peninsula, between Bohai and Yellow Sea] and Wasted in Death', which penetrated deeply into the people's heart. He also knows how to grasp the popular sentiment; hence he receives great support from Shandong [province, northeast China] populace, far surpasses Du Fuwei."

After a short pause he continued, “If internal strife arose between Zhai Rang and Li Mi, I have no doubt that the one reaping the benefit must be Qinghe [county, Hebei] man Dou Jiande. This man is the overlord of the dark road [criminal/underworld] in Hebei. He has been absent for a long time. Later on, because his family and relatives were wiped out by men who were sent by Yang Guang, in his anger he joined Gao Shida’s militia. When Gao Shida died in battle, the leadership of the militia then fell into his hands. This man’s martial art skill already reached the state of perfection, his men numbered in hundred thousand. They occupied Gao Jibo and made it the base of their operations, their influence reached the Yellow River. This man cannot be ignored.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Listening to Li Dage’s analysis sure beats listening to his mother’s at the restaurant for three months. Those Yang Xuan’gan, Song Zixian, Wang Xuba, Wei Dao’er, Li Zitong, Lu Mingyue, Liu Wuzhuo, and what have you. Listening about that bunch of names my head was swollen. Turns out the most formidable ones are only these few.”

Li Jing took out dry rations for everyone to share. He said, “We must stay here until late into the night before we can leave. By that time the pursuing troops would have been weary and their horses tired from the earlier commotion. Even if we come across them, we won’t have anything to worry.”

The two boys already regarded Li Jing, they simply nodded their heads vigorously.

Susu asked, “Now that Li Dage has left Du Fuwei, what’s your plan for the future?”

Li Jing did not answer. He asked them instead, “What about the three of you? What’s your plan?”

Hanging down her head, Susu said, “I am thinking of returning to Rongyang to look for Miss, asking her to warn Laoye to guard against Li Mi.”

Kou Zhong replied, “We want to go to Luoyang to find a friend.”

Li Jing nodded. “I am thinking of going to the Capital to see what will be the destiny of the Sui people,” he said, “Since we all are going to the north anyway, let me see the three of you off for a while! Along the way I can teach two Xiao Xiongdi some horseback riding and archery, as well as some basic martial art skills.”

“Shifu!” the two boys called out in great delight.

Li Jing laughed in spite of himself, “By all means you must not call me Shifu,” he said, “We are of the same generation who happen to make friends and exchange pointers. Besides, the basic

internal training your Niang has laid down for you is indeed deep and immeasurable, plus the two of you have extremely fine bones, and are quick-witted and adaptable. In the future you will definitely become people of great power and influence or at least martial art experts of this age. Perhaps right now you don't even believe in yourselves, but future facts will definitely confirm the truth that I did not make any error in judgment."

While the two boys 'you look at me, I look at you', Li Jing already straightened up and rose up. "Let me teach you how to ride first," he said, "Later on I will teach you saber technique. Back and forth my saber technique only consists of about a dozen styles. It will be most beneficial to be used to charge into thousand troops ten thousand horses, but to contend for supremacy in Jianghu, I am afraid it will be inadequate. Only in rushing headlong in the battlefield will it shows its infinite power, you won't have to fear the enemy's many men and great force. As for the Ol' Li's archery skill, it originated from Hu people's [generic name for non-Han people] equestrian archery technique, hence I rather have confidence in myself."

The two boys have never imagined that they would have this fortuitous meeting; hence they promptly prostrated themselves to express their gratitude.

Li Jing roared in laughter and led them out of the cave.

Pursuing Troops' Sudden Arrival

When darkness fell that day, because the two boys' riding skill was not perfected yet, the four people rode on two horses, leaving one horse as spare, in case they had to make their escape by taking advantage of the dark. Li Jing and Xu Ziling rode together, while Kou Zhong and Susu rode the other horse.

Kou Zhong wrapped his arms around Susu's waist, leaning close to her fragrant back, smelling the sweet fragrance of her body and her hair; he was wishing that they could continue like this forever.

On one hand, Susu was still fearful and nervous, secondly, she already regarded Kou Zhong as her little brother; although she did feel the close contact between them, the feeling was not intense. It had never occurred to her that this kid Kou Zhong was immersing himself in this pleasure.

Li Jing was definitely not an ordinary character; from time to time he would dismount and put his ear on the ground to listen whether there was hidden troops on the road ahead. He also

knew how to make use of the terrain to mask their route; he was not impatient or reckless at all.

By daybreak, the four of them finally left the danger zone and entered the suburb on the outskirts of Danyang County area.

Jiangdu of Yangzhou was the last big city on the tributary of Yangtze River before it flows into the ocean. From here to the west were precisely Danyang and Liyang, two big strategic cities along the river. If Liyang fell into the hands of Du Fuwei, the river route along Yangtze was immediately cut off, while at the same time threw Danyang into a state of emergency.

But Li Jing pointed out that it would not be easy for Du Fuwei to capture Liyang, he only had enough power to invade the neighboring villages and towns nearby, which were powerless to resist. Even stabilizing Liyang would require him to ask for the Heaven's blessing, so invading Danyang would be out of question.

Second reason was that Yang Guang remained in control of the Capital, Daxing, the eastern capital Luoyang, and the coastal Jiangdu, three of the country's most important strategic cities.

After the three big canals, Guangtong, Tongji and Yongji, were connected to each other, the north and south were also connected into one stretch, and the water transportation had the three strategic cities closely linked with each other, enabling the

Sui country's army, whose power was growing, to be deployed rapidly to the south to suppress the rebellion.

Supposing that Luoyang was Emperor Yang's eastern capital, then Yangzhou's Jiangdu was his southern capital. Both were areas that must be fought over, and both were areas that Emperor Yang must defend. Therefore, the Sui army spared no expense in defending Danyang, so that no disaster would reach Jiangdu.

From this, it can be seen that Du Fuwei occupying Liyang was the turning point in the struggle between the rebel's army and the Sui army.

The closer they were to Danyang, the more they felt the tension of the situation. They saw continuous flow of warships going toward Jiangdu, as well as warships bound for Danyang. The Sui army set up checkpoint everywhere, prohibiting members of Wulin from entering Danyang, causing people who did not live in Danyang to turn back and spread rumors that Danyang was already closed.

Fortunately they had no intention of entering Danyang to begin with, so they simply entered the neighboring rural county and sold the three war-horses and made a small fortune.

Li Jing divided the silver into four parts and urged the others to

keep to money and hide it well; he said, “At the time of turmoil and chaos of war, anything might happen. Right now the three biggest power among the rebels, Dou Jiande occupied Hebei, Du Fuwei took over Huai River, while Zhai Rang held control over the Central Plains[1]; the situation will gradually become clear. It also put the Sui army fragmentation in the open. However, taking the opportunity of the uprising, four black hegemons started to loot, the black road [again, ‘black’ here refers to criminal/underworld] powers intending to get their share of the action are measured in cartloads and gallons. If anyone meets some mishaps along the way, we will try to rendezvous at Gaoyou [county level city in Yangzhou], and we’ll find a ship from there to go up north by the canal, trying to make it to Luoyang.”

After giving Susu a couple of glances, he noticed that due to her thin clothing, she was shivering from the cold. He said, “Tonight we’ll find a hotel here to get some rest. You two and Susu go buy some warm winter clothes to avoid getting sick due to the exposure to cold weather and snow. When you are done, we’ll meet again here.”

“Li Dage, where are you going?” Kou Zhong wondered.

Li Jing squinted his eyes under the bright afternoon sun to scan the shops lining both sides of the street; he seemed to be looking for something. “I want to look for a weapon store, to see if I can find two similar long saber for you to defend yourselves. I hope the price is not too high! In time like this, selling sabers and

swords is the best business.”

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted. “In that case,” he said, “Let’s go our separate way to do our business!”

Upon splitting up, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling walked on the right and left of Susu, following the crowd of pedestrians along the long street trying to find clothing store. This town was near Danyang; it was extremely thriving. Due to refugees who fled from Liyang, it was even more lively. However, there was a faint impenetrable fear and nervousness in the air. Most of the shops have already closed their door.

Xu Ziling said, “Maybe we’d better go to the marketplace to see if there is any mobile vendor stall over there?” Thereupon the three of them changed direction toward the marketplace.

Because of the crowd, Susu reached out to hold on to the two boys’ arms so that they would not get separated, but also to get a bit of warmth from them. This had made the two boys pleased and a bit bewitched by her.

Kou Zhong whispered in Susu’s ear, “Jiejie’d better buy men’s clothing; if you wear hat, it will cover Jiejie’s beautiful hair, others won’t be able to see that Jiejie is actually a very beautiful woman.”

Being praised like that, Susu nodded her head cheerfully.

In the meantime the three of them have entered the marketplace. Sure enough, there were a large number of street stalls with their merchandise laid out on the ground, hawking all kinds of goods, especially winter clothing.

Xu Ziling also whispered in Susu's ear, "We'd better trim your long hair a little bit, and have your hair in a male bun like ours. It will be even more foolproof [orig. in ten thousand, not one fail]."

Susu happily said, "Will you do that for me?"

The two boys bragged, "Naturally that would be best!"

Susu pulled the two boys to stop at one of the street vendors, and enthusiastically selected a set of winter clothing and a pair of winter boots with exceptionally high heels. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were highly amused, while their hearts were filled with warm feeling.

Suddenly, almost at the same time the two of them noticed several rogue, local-ruffian like, strong and muscular men nearby were staring lecherously at Susu, who were squatting on the ground, while whispering to each other. The two boys felt very uneasy, while cursing in their hearts.

Kou Zhong hurriedly stooped down to help Susu picking suitable set of clothing. And then, without haggling over the price, he painfully paid at more than twice the price, and quickly turned around and left.

As soon as they were out of the marketplace, the two boys breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Bang!’ They were just entering the main street, someone crossed the street and fiercely bumped his shoulder against Xu Ziling’s shoulder.

Xu Ziling was caught off-guard, naturally his shoulder recoiled a little before he sent out his strength to react; at the same time the sole of his feet felt hot, as if there was a stream of heat flowing toward his shoulder.

“Ah!” the man cried out in pain and fell back, nearly sitting on the ground.

When the three of them halted their steps in shock, six other men came out to block their path and shouted, “You hit people!”

The two boys took a closer look; sure enough, four out of six were the hoodlums who stared at Susu a moment ago, immediately they knew what was going on.

[1] Strictly speaking, 'Central Plains' consists of middle and lower region of the Yellow River, including Henan, western Shandong, southern Shanxi and Hebei; but Central Plains is also interchangeable with China.

Other passerby got out of their way in a flurry, afraid a disaster would come to the fish in the moat. [This must be a Chinese saying, but honestly I don't get it.]

Susu's flower-like countenance paled, Xu Ziling pulled her back two steps, while Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "Everywhere under the sun [orig. five lakes four oceans] are brothers, a long and difficult road [orig. ten thousand rivers a thousand mountains] is a family. Yangzhou's Zhu Hua Bang [Bamboo Flower Gang] Second Hall's Hall Master is our Ah Gong [could be grandpa, or simply elder]; I wonder how should I address these Dage [big brother]." He also performed the secret hand signal of the Bamboo Flower Gang.

The seven hoodlums exchanged glances with each other, while also made a bit panicky signals with their hands and feet.

Bamboo Flower Gang had a rather considerable power in Yangzhou region, otherwise Kou Zhong would not invent crazy nonsense about him being Bamboo Flower Gang member.

One of the men, a bulky man who was clearly the leader, took a

step forward and said, “I don’t care who you are, the fact is that you hit one of our brothers. How are you going to compensate for that?”

Since he was a kid Kou Zhong grew up in the marketplace, how could he not know that the situation before his eyes would be difficult to defuse? Seeing how these men’s eyes fell on Susu’s ample breasts, although he was a bit apprehensive, he knew that they could not run away. Therefore, hardening his heart, he laughed aloud again and said, “Money, we don’t have any; but lives, we do have a couple. If you have enough ability, come and get it.”

With a gust of wind the thug on his left sent out a sweeping kick.

Kou Zhong was greatly surprised; how could this guy’s leg move so slowly? It just did not make any sense.

Another man charged from the right, sending a fist toward his face.

When these two boys were still in Yangzhou, it could be said that they grew up with fighting and receiving a beating, hence their experience was incomparably rich. They were used to fight together, so as soon as the opponents made their move, Xu Ziling pulled Susu two steps back. But as he was about to join the fray,

Kou Zhong, as if he had eyes behind his back, called out, “You watch for Jiejie.”

Kou Zhong leaned sideways to evade the attack, and then sent a kick to the left, while simultaneously ducked down and struck with his arm, punching the lower abdomen of the thug who attacked his face. His movement was so nimble that even Xu Ziling was awestruck.

More fantastic things happened: right when Kou Zhong was brandishing his arm, he felt his whole body was immersed in unspeakable coolness, while from the top of his head a stream of cold feeling flowed down, linking up the channels on his arm, and burst forth from his fist.

‘Bang!’ The sound of his fist striking its target was mixed with a miserable scream of his victim, whose entire body flew out and crashed onto another thug; the two men were thrown to the ground, rolling around as one entity like a gourd, totally battered and exhausted.

While Kou Zhong was looking at his own fist in disbelief, his ears caught Susu and Xuziling’s cry of alarm; he knew something was wrong. Right this moment another man kned him on his back. Kou Zhong tumbled forward in pain.

Seeing his sneak attack succeeded, the hoodlum wanted to

follow-up with another attack, but suddenly he felt a burst of cold stream rushed forth wildly into his body from his knee, making him feel as if he had been thrown into an icehouse, while his brain was jolted with severe pain. Before he knew what was going on, he suddenly found out that he was laying face up on the ground, unable to crawl back up.

Kou Zhong dropped down and rolled away to evade the incoming two kicks; amazingly, the pain on his back suddenly went away without any medicine.

As he sprang up, he found out that Xu Ziling was dashing on bravely with no thought of his safety. 'Bang, bang, pow, pow!' He sent punches and kicks toward the remaining five overbearing thugs without reservation.

The first thug who was hit by Kou Zhong's punch and the one who kneed him from behind were still lying on the ground, unable to get up.

Xu Ziling fought like he was mad or was possessed; he was completely ignoring the incoming punches and kicks, yet was able to lightly evade the attacks, while ferociously counterattacked. The ones hit by him immediately sprayed blood from their mouth and fell down to the ground.

Kou Zhong still did not understand what was going on.

By this time there were hundreds of people all around them, cheering and clapping for them. At the same time he caught a glimpse of several government officers, while shouting and yelling, squeezing their way through the crowd.

Kou Zhong immediately called out, “Xiao Ling, the legs [sic] are coming, pull back!”

Xu Ziling jumped in fright. He launched a flying kick toward the last opponent, and then turned around, and together with Kou Zhong and Susu, slipped away as fast as they could.

The three people ran for a while until they found a secluded place where they could change into their winter clothes. By the time they emerged from an alley and turned into the main street, at first glance people would merely see three ordinary young men.

Susu was still very much afraid, but her expression was happy, knowing that the two boys were fighting for her.

On the way toward the agreed place where they were going to rendezvous with Li Jing, the two boys turned their faces toward Susu’s flowery pretty face while excitedly narrated what has just happened.

Very proud of himself, Kou Zhong said, “When that out-of-luck guy hit me on my back, it was so painful that I was about to vomit blood, but in the blink of an eye there was a comfortable cool qi bubbling forth in my entire body, so comfortable that I wanted to call Niang, and all the pain was gone. And that guy was shaken back by laozi’s [I, your father] inner strength protecting my body that he nearly lost his eggs.”

Hearing him speaking all those vulgar words, Susu felt an unspeakable intimacy and delight instead; she pulled the two boys’ arms closer.

Xu Ziling laughed aloud and said, “You are cool I am hot. I have never had such an immensely enjoyable fight. Real tooth real jaw, one man one punch, he hit me I am alright, I hit him he spurted blood. If the first level of Nine Mysteries Power is already this formidable, just think what would happen if we train to the ninth level, won’t we blow off Yuwen Huagu’s eggs altogether?”

Kou Zhong stretched out his head to get a good sniff at Susu’s hair; swaying his head he said with a sigh, “Our good Jiejie smells really good, no wonder she attracted that many wild bees and wandering butterflies.”

Susu was ticklish and shrunk down her neck. “Xiao Zhong,” she said angrily, “If you keep making mischief, I am going to tell Li Dage.”

Xu Ziling also brought his nose closer and sucked in a deep breath, while saying with a laugh, “One sniff per person, it’s only fair.”

Susu laughed so hard that her beautiful body shook, while she tried to dodge left and right. The three of them zigzagging on the street, catching the attention of other passerby.

Susu suddenly pulled the boys to stop, while calling out, “We are here!”

The three of them still refused to let their hands go; they huddled together and yakety-yak they chatted incessantly. Yet there was not the slightest degree of improper thought or evil desire between men and women at all, there was only a pure, innocent love between sister and brother who have gone through trials and tribulations together.

After waiting for a while and Li Jing has not returned, the three of them retreated toward a nearby small alley perpendicular to the main street, where they continued their chatting and joking.

Kou Zhong jokingly said, “Jiejie must not go back to where your Miss of the Zhai family resides. Servant girls have always had to suffer maltreatment, much less when your Laoye failed to overcome Li Mi, Jiejie’s life will be miserable. Those so-called ‘righteous army’ people [see my earlier note, Chapter 10 on

‘righteous army’] are mostly worse than beast. I wonder how many are like Li Dage.”

With a bitter laugh Susu said, “Jiejie has no family no relatives; if I don’t go back to Zhai family, where would I go?”

Xu Ziling excitedly said, “You can come with Li Dage and us roaming the other end of the world! This world is so big, wherever we go, we can stay there making money and taking care of Jiejie. Only that kind of life won’t bore us to death!”

Susu caught on the excitement. “That’s right!” she said, “I can wash your clothes, I can attend to your daily life. Ay! I am sure Li Dage won’t be willing join us in that kind of life. He is a broad-minded and open man, a man who aims high. Just look how he is always in deep contemplation and you’ll see what I mean.”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “In that case you can be with us, two brothers then. We will be together forever, we promise to be obedient and show filial piety to Jiejie.”

Susu was overjoyed, “We will be very happy then,” she said. “Oh! There is just one thing wrong: some day you will get married and bear children, won’t my pitiful situation become very awkward?”

Striking his chest, Xu Ziling promised, “For Jiejie, we will never

get married.”

Susu shook her head, “How can that be?” she asked, “Carry on your ancestral line is every man’s duty. It would be better if Jiejie is married to the two of you.”

“What?” the two boys were shocked.

Susu matter-of-factly and innocently said, “In Pujia Village, there are a lot of two brothers marrying one wife. At night they all sleep together.”

Kou Zhong’s eyes lit up, “That’s a lot of fun too!”

Xu Ziling shook his head, “That won’t do,” he said, “It would be better if we draw lots to decide who get to marry Jiejie, the loser will have to find a way to find his own wife.”

In complete bliss, Susu said, “No, no, the right thing is: the loser will have to marry me. In the future both of you will become great heroes, the wife you’ll find will definitely be much better than having Jiejie as your wife.”

The three people looked at each other, then they doubled-up in laughter at the same time. Pulling one another in a group hug, their hearts were brimming with a genuine, pure feeling that they would not part forever.

Gasping for breath, Kou Zhong said, "Jiejie really knows how to play with us, how to coax us to be this happy, while actually she only wants to marry Li Dage!"

Susu's pretty face immediately blushed deep red. "Don't talk nonsense!" she angrily said.

Xu Ziling struggled hard to suppress his laughter until tears streaming down his face. Suddenly he saw a group of men, about a dozen men were walking across the street. Each one looked around with his eyes wide open. Two of those men had black head and swollen face; they were precisely the thugs who received lessons from them earlier.

Hurriedly he pulled the other two aside to hide behind a big tree in an alley across the street. By this time Kou Zhong and Susu have also seen the men. They all held their breath in fear.

"Why haven't Li Dage returned?" Susu said, "With him here, we have nothing to fear."

The two boys were also wondering, Li Jing only wanted to buy some blades, there was no reason he would take such a long time.

Overwhelmed with horror, Xu Ziling said, "Within this bunch of

hooligans, there are two or three that look like they belong to the same gang, plus they carry weapons. I am afraid they don't have any good intention."

Kou Zhong said in a low voice, "If we have sabers, we need not fear them, but we must never take their blades. Although our martial art skill is high, I am afraid the first level of Nine Mysteries Power is not enough to withstand weapons, especially necks are so frail."

"Don't say that!" Susu shrieked, "Ay! Where is Li Dage?"

Right this moment, from the other end of the alley someone staggered along in their direction, it was precisely Li Jing.

The three people were scared out of their wits and rushed over. As soon as Li Jing saw them, his legs gave up and he collapsed to the ground.

Like an arrow Kou and Xu, two boys darted forward and propped him up from left and right.

Susu nearly threw herself into Li Jing's bosom, but when her hands touched his clothes, she was aghast to find that her hands were soaked with blood.

Li Jing's face was completely devoid of any blood; strenuously,

he said in low voice, “Five men from Du Fuwei’s team of martial art masters ‘Law Enforcement Regiment’ have come. I killed four of them, but one escaped. You don’t have to worry about me, just run away immediately, otherwise it will be too late.”

Susu waved her hands and feet frantically, “Where is the blood-clotting powder? We must stop Dage’s bleeding first.”

Kou Zhong knew the situation was critical, he pointed to one of the backdoors nearby. Together with Xu Ziling they helped Li Jing toward the door, pushed the door open by force, and took refuge in someone’s rear courtyard. Susu quickly pushed the wooden door closed again.

The courtyard was overgrown with weed, apparently the residents of this house have left earlier.

By this time Li Jing has already fallen into a semi-conscious state. The three people did not have time to observe propriety. They broke into the house, lay Li Jing on a long table, and took off his clothes. To their surprise they found out that he had at least seven wound, the deep ones reached his bones, the shallow ones cut into his flesh. Fortunately, except for the most critical saber cut on his torso, the other cuts were either on his back, arms or thigh. Apparently the battle was very dangerous and very intense.

In this critical situation Kou Zhong was not flustered, “Xiao Ling,

go find blood-clotting medicine, I will try to get a horse cart. Either by stealing, robbing or swindling, don't care about it too much. We'll leave as soon as it is dark."

Susu was busy examining and cleaning up the wound with tears streaming down her face. The three people looked at each other, they all determined to save Li Jing's life. Then the two boys left separately.

With great difficulty Xu Ziling managed to find a drugstore and bought some blood-clotting powder. When he was rushing back, he came face to face with the group of thugs they saw earlier. Xu Ziling noticed that every single one of them carried either a sword or a saber; they looked fierce and menacing. Busily he raised his collar and continued walking briskly with head hung low.

As they past each other, he was recognized by one of the men who received a beating from him. "It's him!" the man shouted.

'Qiang! Qiang!' the sound of the evil thugs' sword leaving its sheathe lingered in the air, the other pedestrians were so scared that they scattered like flying chicken or running dogs.

Xu Ziling did not have even a cun of weapon in his possession; even if he did, he would not dare to fight so many people. He yelled and ran like mad along the street.

The evil thugs ran after him in hot pursuit.

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong could be considered experts in running away. When they were in Yangzhou, every time they were defeated, they had to rely on their two feet to save their lives. This time, turning to the left and winding to the right, fully utilizing the other pedestrians as barrier between him and the pursuing troops, he ran faster and faster away.

He felt the warm stream inside his body was circulating endlessly. The sole of his left foot was steaming hot, while the sole of his right foot was icy-cold. The more he ran, the more he felt comfortable. His mind was as calm as the still water; he even nearly forgot the enemy.

By the time he rounded a bent and entered a small alley, he had left the bunch of thugs far behind that he could not even see them.

Xu Ziling made another circle before returning to their safe house. When he arrived, Susu was waiting for him while her heart was burning with anxiety.

The two of them scrambled with their hands and feet to apply the blood-clotting powder onto Li Jing's wounds and wrapped the wounds well. By the time they finished dressing the wounds, it was already dusk. They also put clean clothes on him.

Although Li Jing was still unconscious, his breathing was slow and even, so that they were a bit relieved.

Susu said, “Fortunately Li Dage’s wounds have the capability to automatically shrink to stop the bleeding, otherwise it would be even worse. Ay! Why haven’t Xiao Zhong come back yet?”

Xu Ziling did not say anything. He took out the treasured saber that Li Jing carried. Walking to the middle of the room, he practiced the saber technique Li Jing taught him on his own initiative, the one Li Jing names ‘Bloody Battle Ten Styles’.

When Li Jing first taught them the saber technique, he did not have too deep of comprehension and perception. But now that Li Jing was seriously hurt and powerful enemy loomed outside, his heart was boiling with grief, indignation, and desperation. He only felt that each step each chop was a move with which he fought for his life. Temporarily he was in a no-self, no-consciousness state.

From the first move, ‘Two Armies Encamped Face-to-face’, followed by ‘Exposing the Tip of the Fire Beacon’, ‘Light Cavalry Charges Ahead’, ‘Feeling the Pocket and Taking Something Out’, ‘One Battle and Success is Achieved’, ‘Acting on Overbearing, Stirring Emptiness’, ‘Troops without Regular Power’, ‘Life or Death, Exist or Perish’, ‘Unyielding and Escaping’, until the tenth style, ‘Ruler Overlooking the World’; he felt that every move was

going smoothly and easily.

From the tenth style he was going to start over from the first one when suddenly Susu yelled at him, “Xiao Ling, stop it!”

Xu Ziling was stunned and stopped abruptly. He saw Susu was standing in front of Li Jing, shielding him; her face was blue her lips white. “Your saber seemed to emit hot wind; it’s extremely frightening.”

Xu Ziling stared blankly in amazement; why didn’t he feel it, he wondered. It seemed that his Nine Mysteries Great Method could be considered progressing a bit more. Only if he really met an enemy, would he be able to put it to good use?

‘Bang!’ Kou Zhong slammed the door open and came in. “Mule cart is here, let’s go!” he cried out.

The two people were greatly delighted. Without even asking how he managed to get a mule cart, they lifted Li Jing up using belts wrapped around his body, and loaded him onto the mule cart waiting in the courtyard, on top of piles of straw. Susu embraced him in her arms.

Kou Zhong drove the mule cart, from the back door they followed the alley and turned into the street, just as more than a dozen other mule carts and horse carts, carrying men, women,

young and old, were heading toward the county town gate. Kou Zhong was greatly delighted, he steered the cart into the middle of the pack, hoping to ‘pass off fish eyes for pearls’, and slip out of the county town.

Xu Ziling had Li Jing’s treasured saber inside its scabbard lying on his knees. He said in a low voice, “Just now I practiced Li Dage’s ‘Bloody Battle Ten Styles’; it was really fun. Jiejie even said that my saber emitted hot wind!”

“Looks like the Nine Mysteries Skill Niang taught combined with those ghost diagrams from the Secret to Long Life can become formidable martial art,” Kou Zhong commented, “Ay! Too bad we only have one saber. Otherwise with a pair of sabers working together in harmony we could be matchless under the heavens.”

Xu Ziling laughed, “Go to your Niang!” he swore, “Oh, no! Won’t that be go to my Niang as well? You, this kid, always love to boast and to praise yourself. Compared to Niang and Yuwen Huaji, our skills differ too far. Handling a few bullies is still alright, but if ...”

Kou Zhong laughed bitterly and said, “Precisely like you said. Look! The bullies are coming. Shall we go or not?”

Following his gaze, Xu Ziling saw close to twenty local ruffians were mingling among the county officers by the county town

gate, inspecting the carts and pedestrians going out of town, but they had not seen them.

The two boys' countenance became very ugly.

Gnashing his teeth, Xu Ziling said, "I'll draw them away!"

Kou Zhong was shocked, "If you die, what am I going to do?" he asked.

Xu Ziling's eyes flickered with cold rays. "I won't die," he confidently assured him, "You go about half a li outside the city and wait for me."

Kou Zhong knew it was the only way. "I won't leave without you," he said grimly, "If I don't see you, I will go back and stake my life with them."

By this time Susu also knew something was not right; terrified, she said, "No, we'd better find a place to hide!"

Xu Ziling shook his head resolutely, "If we tolerate these thugs, we lose a good opportunity to deal with them. If that bunch of Du Fuwei's law enforcement murderers came, we will lose our lives. So this is our only chance."

"Be careful!" Kou Zhong said.

Xu Ziling took out the treasured saber, left the scabbard behind, and jumped off the cart.

Kou Zhong and Susu watched as Xu Ziling courageously dashed toward the enemy; the two people's heart almost got caught in their throat.

The evil thugs also caught sight of Xu Ziling. Shouting and yelling, they drew their weapons and swarmed forward.

Carrying Li Jing's treasured saber, Xu Ziling turned toward the big street by the city wall.

The convoy of carts and carriages immediately increased their speed to get out of the county town as quickly as possible. Kou Zhong and Susu felt as if their heart was twisted and was set on fire as they had to endure quietly and urged their mule to get out of town.

As they watched those nearly twenty evil thugs chasing Xu Ziling, eventually Kou Zhong and Susu could not hold back their tears.

The instant they passed the city gate, they saw Xu Ziling turned around and charged wildly toward the pursuing enemy.

Susu screamed. The mule cart was out of town.

Book 2 Chapter 1 – The Wily Old Fox

In an instant Xu Ziling's mind, body and spirit entered into an unprecedented state.

He felt his mental and physical have fused into one entity, which was then transformed into some kind of transcending-the-ordinary surge of energy.

His eyes brightened, as he charged fearlessly into a clump of ten or so thugs head on. He even felt that he could react a tad faster than they were able to move. Plus he could indistinctly feel the angle and the timing of each weapon as it came, as well as the opening in each attack. He felt that could even tell which enemy was strong and which one was weak.

Too bad he did not know how to exploit this fantastic newly-found ability.

The heat stream had started to flow from the sole of his left foot, going up.

The first to arrive was obviously the strongest evil thug, who brandished a big hatchet in his hand from right to left, hacking at Xu Ziling's face. Before the hatchet arrived, the gust of wind from the hatchet and the whistling noise as the hatchet split the air have already piercing his skin and his ears; with his new-found sensitivity, everything felt as if it was amplified several times.

The 'Bloody Battle Ten Styles' that Li Jing taught flashed through his mind like a lightning or a flint spark. Without thinking he launched the move 'Exposing the Tip of the Fire Beacon', the treasured saber swept ...

'Ding!' The hatchet and the saber collided.

Xu Ziling did not expect he really could chop the enemy's hatchet. While he was overjoyed, the man twisted his hatchet with great force, the treasured saber flew off Xu Ziling's hand.

Xu Ziling was so scared that he felt his soul flew out of his body; he did not foresee that although he knew exactly the opponent's follow-up move, but he had no idea how to deal with it. Unexpectedly just one exchange, and he already lost his weapon.

The big hatchet arrived again. Two other enemies also came from his left and right, one using a saber, the other using an iron chain, both were aimed mercilessly toward his body; they did not hold their hands at all just because Xu Ziling was a young kid.

In this critical moment, Xu Ziling saw a gap. Instead of retreating, he lunged forward and rolled on the ground. To his shock, however, he rolled past these two men just to enter the enemy's encirclement.

As the first three enemies' attack missed its target, their own momentum carried them two more steps forward before they managed to stop and turn around.

The other men immediately swarmed in. Xu Ziling sprang up, only to see from left, right and center, three directions, sabers flickered and swords flashed. He had no choice but to step backward.

'Bang!' His back crashed onto the city wall. Not able to retreat anymore, he dropped down along the wall and fell sitting on the ground.

First of all Xu Ziling remembered Kou Zhong; and then he remembered his Niang, followed by Susu and Li Jing.

While in his heart he was crying out his goodbye, something flashed in front of his eyes.

Someone wearing tall hat, around fifty years of age, with countenance that looked old and clumsy, a bit like a dead person,

suddenly dropped from the sky, exactly in between the evil thugs, who were charging wildly, and he. The man even had time to squat down, and showed a warm smile to Xu Ziling, a smile that did not match his weird countenance at all.

Right this moment two sabers, one sword and one chain, because the wielders were not able to hold back, were striking the man's back. But four men screamed miserably with blood spurting out of their mouth as they were thrown backward, while their weapons were stuck onto this strange man's back.

The other evil thugs have never seen such a brilliant martial art skill; overwhelmed with shock, they scattered away; but they still managed to maintain their encirclement.

The man patted Xu Ziling's forehead and helped him to stand up. He even dusted Xu Ziling's clothes with absolute tenderness and attention.

The four men that were shaken by him were still lying motionless on the ground. It seemed like their condition was not promising at all.

The man showed another glimmer of smile as he spoke in tender voice, "You are Xu Ziling, aren't you?"

Xu Ziling's mind went blank; he simply nodded with a blank

expression on his face.

One of the evil thugs behind him called out, “Friend, from which ‘way’ are you?”

A hint of grim smile appeared on the corner of the man’s mouth. Because he had his back against those men, only Xu Ziling was able to see this. He suddenly had a nagging feeling in his heart that this man, who seemed to be making his move from a sense of justice, was not a good person at all.

The man reached back and swiped, the weapons stuck on his back were wrapped in his palm, which was wider than average person’s, without any fear of the sharp edges of the sabers and swords. As if nothing had happened, he said, “I am Du Fuwei. When you, gentlemen, see Yan Huang [King Yama, King of Hell], you must not forget it.”

It was as if a thunderbolt echoed in Xu Ziling’s mind, wasn’t Du Fuwei the top leader of Huai River militia, Li Jing’s former master? He had just led his army to take over Liyang, causing everybody to flee for their lives; how did he suddenly appear here, alone? Not only he saved Xu Ziling’s life, he even knew Xu Ziling’s name?

While these thoughts were running wild in his mind, Du Fuwei flew backward in lightning speed, slamming himself onto a man who was standing about a zhang away behind him.

The man immediately spurted blood as he was thrown back violently; his entire body exploded with the sound of bones breaking and flesh splitting.

At this moment the rest of the evil thugs deeply regretted that their mom and dad did not give birth to them with more than two legs as they scattered in all directions for their lives.

Du Fuwei waved his left hand, the four weapons in his hand flew out to the left and separately embedded themselves into four man's back. His method was frighteningly cruel, but his accuracy really rendered other people speechless.

Xu Ziling thought that if he did not take this opportunity to flee, what was he waiting for? Thereupon he lifted his feet and ran toward the city gate.

Incessant miserable screams followed him from behind.

Du Fuwei's cruelty in killing his victims broke Xu Ziling's courage that he did not have the guts to even look back. Very soon he ran into the mass of refugees scrambling against each other to get out of the city. Ducking to the left and squeezed himself to the right, very soon he reached the official road leading out of town.

Right now his only hope was to find Kou Zhong, and then

together they would run far, far away, never again to see that Prince of the Devils.

Suddenly Du Fuwei's frightening voice echoed right next to his ears, "Xiao Xiongdi, your feet are really fast!"

Xu Ziling turned his head around, but after glancing to the left and right, he still did not see Du Fuwei. Suddenly he noticed that all around him people were looking above him with terror-stricken expression on their faces. Xu Ziling came to realize something so scary that his soul flew away and scattered.

Du Fuwei landed behind him and grabbed his back. Five streams of qi entered his body via his back.

At first Xu Ziling lost all his strength, but then the sole of his left foot starting to heat up, followed by the sole of his right foot cooling down; unexpectedly he recovered enough strength to struggle.

"Huh?" Du Fuwei was surprised, and then he sent more true qi into Xu Ziling's body.

Kou Zhong steered the mule cart into a wooded area by the road. He jumped down the cart.

Susu asked in horror, "Where are you going?"

Kou Zhong came over to Susu. First he looked down to see Li Jing, who was still unconscious and lying in Susu's bosom, and then he looked up and said seriously, "I believe Xiao Ling's situation is more dire than good. Right now I am going to go back to avenge him. Jiejie should drive the cart deep into the woods. Wait for Li Dage to wake up, then you can think of a way to escape."

On an impulse he took all the silver out of his pocket and placed it in the cart before turning around and left, ignoring Susu's tender call.

He ran back to the main road, and rushed toward the city gate against the flow of people going out of town. Tears constantly poured down his face. His steps were getting faster and faster.

Although all around him people and carts were fighting against each other over their share of the roadway, but to him all of these were not his concern. It was as if he and those people lived in two totally different universes.

Nobody could understand heartfelt and genuine brotherly love between Xu Ziling and him.

He was just avoiding a cart and was forced to move closer to the side of the road when a hand suddenly appeared from the

wooded area, grabbed him, and pulled him inside.

Then his entire body was clasped under someone's arm; immediately he felt weak all over.

He tried to turn his head around, but was still unable to see what kind of person had captured him. Instead, he saw Xu Ziling's big head protruding underneath the person's other arm just like a turtle, repeatedly making eye signals to him, warning him that they were in danger.

'Bang, bang!' The two boys were tossed on a grassy ground at the edge of the woods; their heads dizzy from falling down headfirst. Humming and hawing they tried to crawl up.

The two boys looked around, but Du Fuwei was nowhere to be seen. With a shout they fled for their lives.

Suddenly 'thud!' Kou Zhong fell down to the ground. Xu Ziling was already more than ten zhang ahead, but he turned around and ran back. It was not until he wanted to lift Kou Zhong up that he realized that Kou Zhong had fainted.

Dejected, Xu Ziling sat on the ground. Du Fuwei's legs suddenly appeared before his eyes.

Gasping for breath, Xu Ziling asked, "What do you want?"

Du Fuwei said indifferently, "You may leave now!"

Shaken, Xu Ziling looked up. He saw Du Fuwei's icy-cold expression. "Did you just say I can go now?" he asked in disbelief.

Du Fuwei nodded, "That's right!" he said, "You may leave now. But only you, alone."

Xu Ziling was crestfallen. "I would never sell a friend to seek my own glory," he said.

Du Fuwei squatted and smiled, "Your Jianghu experience is too shallow," he said, "Just with one test I can tell the relationship between you and Kou Zhong. Great! Now I am going to ask you a question, and you reply with one answer. You must not hesitate at all; otherwise I will crush your good friend's hands and feet, so that he will be maimed for the rest of his life."

Xu Ziling was aghast. "What do I am giving you wrong answers have anything to do with him? Don't you think you are being too unfair?"

With a wooden face Du Fuwei said, "There is no such thing as fairness in the world. Otherwise, there won't be emperors, there won't be beggars begging for food. Don't even think of giving me any random answer. I am going wake Kou Zhong up later, and if

your answers do not agree with each other, I will know whether you are babbling nonsense or not. One lie, I am going to dig Kou Zhong's eyeball out; two lies, it will be your good friend's hands and feet's turn."

Listening to him, Xu Ziling's entire body went numb. In term of cruelty and heartlessness, the so-called gangsters and villains he met in Yangzhou became kind and benevolent men.

Du Fuwei speculated inwardly, 'I want to see now if you, this kid, will be disobedient.'

Actually, he felt it was beneath his dignity to kill those evil thugs who pursued Xu Ziling and wanted to kill him; it was only because Du Fuwei wanted Xu Ziling to believe that he was a cruel man that he hardened his heart and bore the pain to kill them.

The fact that Yuwen Huaji hunted down these two kids, and they were rescued by Gaoli demoness [orig. female Luocho (demon in Buddhism)] Fu Junchuo, has caused sensation in Jianghu; especially since this matter involved the treasure trove of Duke Yang, Du Fuwei was very interested. Therefore, when his subordinate spoke about the boys' appearance, he rushed over personally, just as Xu Ziling and the others, including unconscious Li Jiang, were about to leave town.

Now that he saw Xu Ziling has succumbed under pressure, he

was very excited; but outwardly he showed indifference as he asked, “Why did Yuwen Huaji want to catch you?”

After giving Kou Zhong a glance, Xu Ziling dejectedly said, “That must be because of that ghost book!”

Du Fuwei showed off his acting skill; to show that he was not completely ignorant, he carelessly said, “So it’s the ‘Secret to Long Life’ that the tyrant wanted to obtain. Not only that tyrant is bloody and cruel, he is totally ignorant as well! Immortality! What a devious idea!”

In a roundabout way he asked, “So who taught you true qi cultivation?”

Judging from his questions, it was obvious that Du Fuwei was not a simple man at all. His question did not follow any particular sequence; rather, he adopted a surprise-attack technique so that the opponent did not have time to prepare the answer in advance.

Sure enough, Xu Ziling was dumbstruck. Seeing Du Fuwei’s eyes flashed with cold rays, he hurriedly shook his hand and said, “Don’t! I’ll speak! Niang taught me.”

It was Du Fuwei’s turn to be shocked, “Your Niang?”

Xu Ziling knew he could not hide anything from this Prince of the Devils; therefore, he sighed and narrated the course of events concerning their encounter with Fu Junchuo. When he reached the part where Fu Junchuo died, his eyes turned red, he nearly cried. He forgot completely that Du Fuwei was not someone with whom he could bare his soul to.

Who would have thought that Du Fuwei stretched out his hand toward Kou Zhong's eyes, shook his head and said, "You are lying!"

Xu Ziling was shocked. Calling out to Heaven for the injustice he said, "If I say one empty word, may I die a horrible death."

Du Fuwei really did not disbelieve him, it's just that he was toying with him to get the most important piece of information. His tone turned gentle as he said, "The true qi within you does not seem to have the least connection with Gaoli's Yi Jian Dashi [see Book 1 Chapter 3] Fu Cailin's Nine Mysteries Qi; how could the LuoCha woman teach you?"

Xu Ziling breathed a sigh of relief; assuming the 'oh, so that's what it is' attitude, he sighed and said, "Niang only taught us the theory of training, but she did not have time to teach us how to train. Without any clue, we had no choice but looking at the 'Secret to Long Life' and train according to the lines indicated by the diagrams. This is the truth; if you don't believe me, there is

nothing I can do.”

Du Fuwei’s eyes lit up, but pretending to be discouraged he said, “This is a really fantastic story, turns out the ‘Secret to Long Life’ is indeed a martial art manual. But even if I obtain it right now, it’s useless. Unless I am willing to disperse my inner power completely. Humph, did the Luocha woman mention anything about the Duke Yang’s treasure-trove? Never mind; even if she did not, it’s not a big deal, I can always dig her body out. I am sure I will find some ‘spider’s thread and horse track’.”

Horried, Xu Ziling cried out, “How could you do such thing?”

Right this moment, he saw Kou Zhong’s hand twitched a little; apparently he was about to wake up.

Du Fuwei had his back facing Kou Zhong, hence he did not see it. He calmly said, “Why don’t you tell me then? Ay! Buried and at rest, naturally it would be best if we don’t disturb your Niang.”

Xu Ziling hung his head down as he said with a sigh, “I surrender! But you have to let us go. Duke Yang’s treasure-trove is inside the Emperor Guan Temple located at the northern part of Yangzhou. If you move the idol away, you will see the tunnel leading to the hidden treasure. Niang was about to take the treasure out when she came across us. If you don’t believe me, you can wake Kou Zhong up to see if our story matches. You

knocked him out for so long, could there be any problem?"

Du Fuwei stared blankly and said, "Yangzhou city? This is certainly unimaginable to present day people. Ha!" Stretching out his finger, he sent out a strong gust of wind, Xu Ziling immediately passed out.

After nobody knows how long, Xu Ziling finally regained his consciousness. He saw Kou Zhong was sitting dejectedly by his side, while Du Fuwei was looking up to the sky, God knows what he was thinking about.

Kou Zhong sighed. "Xiao Ling! Forgive me," he said, "For your little life's sake, I had to reveal the secret of the Temple of Emperor Guan."

"Shut up!" Du Fuwei suddenly snapped, "If I hear three more words from you, I'll kill you." And then he straightened up and stood up. "Get up!" he said.

The two boys' heart was thumping madly in nervousness, since they were unsure if he was going to kill them to shut their mouth.

Du Fuwei's eyes glittered like frost and snow as he coldly looked at them up and down several times. Only after seeing that the hair on their body stood up did he say gently, "I want you, two little demons, to take me to the 'Secret to Long Life' first

before I can give you your freedom.”

“Didn’t you say ‘Secret to Long Life’ is useless to you?” Xu Ziling shouted.

Du Fuwei smiled, “There is no harm in looking, is there?” he said, “From now on, I want you two to call me Die [pronounced ‘dee-eh’, Dad, the counterpart of Niang]. Whatever I say, you’ll do it. Understood? Come! Let me hear you call me Die!”

The two boys looked at each other; they both thought that a wise man submits to circumstances [orig. ‘only an outstanding talent can recognize current trends’], helplessly they lowered their level and called him ‘Dad’, while having a feeling of ‘acknowledging a bandit as their father’ [idiom, meaning complete betrayal or selling oneself to the enemy].

But Du Fuwei was greatly pleased; he roared in laughter and said, “Good kids, let your Die take you to a wine shop and have you eat your fill before leaving. Look! The day is breaking soon; before sunrise, we ought to be able to cover a hundred li or so.”

Book 2 Chapter 2 – Mutual Deception[1]

Carried under Du Fuwei's arms, the two boys really covered about a hundred li that day. Before daybreak they have arrived at Xin'an County [Luoyang, Henan].

This county is one of the two thriving big cities along the Yangtze River. Because the fire of war has not reached this place, compounded with a large numbers of refugees fled here to seek shelter, the city was bustling with noise and excitement.

With hands behind his back and a face that did not show any expression, Du Fuwei led the way. It was not clear whether he felt embarrassed that everybody was avoiding him due to his demonic appearance, or whether he was proud of it.

Kou Zhong made an eye signal to Xu Ziling before he hastened his steps toward Du Fuwei. "Die!" he called, "Aren't you supposed to go back to Liyang to become big king over there? Perhaps there are people who took advantage of your absence to rise in rebellion!"

Du Fuwei said indifferently, “Good boy, you’d better speak a couple of words less. Otherwise, if other people hear it, I would have to kill them to shut their mouth.”

Kou Zhong stuck out his tongue. Pretending to be scared he returned to Xu Ziling’s side and said in a low voice, “Li Dage was right. Die is not a good material for somebody who would conquer the world [tian xia]; he is too eager to kill, and don’t know how to buy the hearts of the people.”

Du Fuwei turned his head around to glower at him; his sharp eyes shot a chilling murderous intention. The scared Kou Zhong did not dare to continue.

Du Fuwei was about two cun taller than the two boys, plus he was wearing a tall hat; walking among the crowd, he really looked like a crane in a flock of chicken, very conspicuous.

The three of them climbed the stairs in the largest restaurant in town. The restaurant was jam-packed with people, trying to find an empty table was definitely harder than ascending the heavens. Du Fuwei pulled a waiter aside and stuffed two strings of zhu coins [1 zhu = 1/24 of a tael] into his hand. God knows how the waiter conjured up his magic trick, right away the waiter led them to an empty table next to a window, and respectfully asked them, three ‘father and sons’ to sit down.

After ordering tea and some appetizers, Du Fuwei only took a sip of tea, and then he stopped and looked at the two boys devouring their food. With an indifferent tone he asked, “Who said I don’t know how to buy the people’s heart?”

Kou Zhong replied in low voice, “If Die knew how to buy the people’s heart, you would not go around forcing people into service, to enlist your troops by force; as a result those who saw it are terrified.”

Du Fuwei was incredulous, “What does a kid like you know? There’s a common saying, ‘wealth define character’. Right now Die can barely scrape a meager living by living like a pauper. If I am not careful, even my family property can be lost. Where can I find the capital to buy the people’s heart?”

Kou Zhong shook his head and swayed his noggin, “If Die knew how to buy the people’s heart, you would dress your children to look like great heroes, so that when you toot your horn about coming to the aid of the people and saving the world, we, two brothers, will follow good ol’ Die delightfully, and even help you conquering the world. It would be much better than relying on fear to control us, and thus harming the congeniality between us, father and sons.”

Xu Ziling could not endure it, he nearly spurt the delicious pastries out of his mouth; but seeing Du Fuwei’s unsightly

countenance, he hurried covered his mouth and hung his head low.

Kou Zhong totally ignored the ominous glint in Du Fuwei's eyes; he still giggled and said, "Die, you, Senior, should not be angry; sincere advice is always unpleasant to hear. The reason the muddle-headed ruler is called muddle-headed ruler is precisely because he is unwilling to listen to sincere advice. Die, if you only want to be a gangster leader, naturally there won't be any problem, but if you want to be the world's leader, no matter how unwilling you are to listen to criticism, you have to put up an attitude of 'respecting the wise', 'encouraging free airings of different views'. Only then would people not call you 'just another muddle-headed ruler'."

Du Fuwei was listening to him with a blank expression on his face.

He started his career by making a life-and-death [orig. kissing neck] friendship with Fu Gongyou, mustering wanderers and riffraff [orig. grass and weeds/uncultivated land] and became the region's overlord of the underworld. Later on he led his troops to seek shelter under Wang Bo of Changbai Mountain. And then he broke away from Wang Bo to become an independent general crisscrossing the Huai River, never suffered any defeat. Right now even Liyang had fallen into his hands, his reputation shook the world. But he had never had anybody dared to reprimand him on his face, especially not a bookish advice coming from a kid's

mouth, whose smell of his mother's milk has not dried yet. However, while listening to him, he felt something fresh; in particular the way Kou Zhong kept calling him 'Dad'. If he got angry because of this, he really lacked grace; therefore, momentarily he did not know how to refute.

Kou Zhong had not finished; he ate and talked at the same time, "Die, your martial art skill is so formidable. It seems to me that even Yuwen Huagu is not your match."

Casting a glance at Du Fuwei's expression, he let out a 'huh?' and then continued, "Could it be that your son kissed the wrong butt? Why does Die's expression become so unsightly? Ay! After obtaining the 'Secret to Long Life', you are going to kill your children to shut our mouths anyway, so just bear with us a bit longer! Or perhaps you could seal our mute acupoint, so that we cannot make any noise. Hee hee! Actually, is mute acupoint real?"

Du Fuwei's strong eyes swept around, he noticed that Kou Zhong constantly increased the volume of his voice. He shook his head with a wry smile and said, "If you, this kid, are thinking about drawing other people's attention to save you, it's just a wishful thinking. All you are doing is just adding a few more lives to take."

Suddenly he reached down under the table to pinch Xu Ziling's thigh. As soon as he exerted strength to his five fingers, Xu Ziling

was in so much pain that he had to spit the culinary delicacy in his mouth.

Kou Zhong raised his hands in mock surrender and said, “Die is still more ruthless than your child. This strategy ‘besieging Wei to rescue Zhao’ [to relieve besieged ally by attacking the home base of the besiegers] and ‘make declaration for the east but strike to the west’, I really cannot ward off. Die, please be magnanimous! Child understood that in everything power trumps logic. Die’s lesson is very good.”

Du Fuwei was still a bit at a loss. His biggest problem was that right now was not the time to kill people to shut their mouth yet. Withdrawing his big hand, he said drily, “From now on you are not allowed to speak.”

Kou Zhong giggled and coughed, trying to stifle his laugh, but in the end he tossed his head back and roared in laughter. Only then did he lower his head and munched busily.

Du Fuwei was so furious he nearly blew his lungs. But since he did not say that they must not laugh, he felt embarrassed to punish them.

The two little demons exchanged a glance and both smiled knowingly in triumph.

Leaving the restaurant, with bamboo toothpicks in their mouth, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling strolled leisurely behind Du Fuwei. From time to time they bumped their shoulders against each other; their mind seemed to be free from the immediate trouble.

Without saying a single word, Du Fuwei headed for the marketplace and bought two horses; he had the two boys ride together in one horse with a strict warning, "If you are still daydreaming about relying on the horse's legs to escape, I will dig one eyeball from each of you. Are we clear?"

The two boys nodded their head deferentially; their appearance made others laugh.

Du Fuwei was in no mood to argue with them, he told them to ride in the front, leading the way, while he followed behind them.

As soon as they left the city, the horses galloped along the official road. Xu Ziling let the horse speed along without trying to rein it at all.

Seeing that Du Fuwei was lagging behind at least five zhang away, Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "This is bad, if we let this evil man takes the treasure underneath the Emperor Guan Temple in Yangzhou, Niang will definitely blame us." But with his other hand he wrote on Xu Ziling's back, "Just now at the restaurant I tried to attract other people's attention. If someone

is blocking our way, we can seize the opportunity to escape.”

Xu Ziling understood his intention, so he said with a sigh, “He is so formidable, we had no choice but to obey. In my opinion, although he is cruel and overbearing, he is actually a good person. At least until now he has not beaten us yet. We’d better give the ‘Secret to Long Life’ to him first, and then we’ll see whether he would really take us as his sons. When he becomes the emperor in the future, won’t we become crown prince? Yifu [foster father/godfather] ought not to kill yizi!” [foster child; ‘yi’ here means ‘righteousness’, same as ‘righteous army’ I mentioned earlier, also same character in ‘yiqi’]

Based on previous experience with Fu Junchuo, the boys knew that even though they were separated by a few zhang, it would be hard to conceal anything from Du Fuwei’s ears.

Kou Zhong knitted his eyebrows and said, “Ay! Just before her death Niang told us about the secret of opening the treasure-trove, something like three left six right, seven forward eight backward, three turns two spins; did you hear her clearly? Seems like there were two more sentences. Niang’s death was so tragic, I cried so hard that my ears turned deaf; how could I hear clearly? Didn’t Niang said that if we fail to know the secret of how to open the door, even if we get into the Temple we won’t find the entrance to the treasure-trove?”

Inwardly Xu Ziling praised Kou Zhong's ingenuity. "Of course I remember," he played along, "But unless he is willing to take us as his sons, otherwise he would kill us to shut our mouths anyway, we might as well not tell him anything. Fortunately Niang taught us the technique to break our main artery; worst case scenario we immediately commit suicide to end our miserable life."

Kou Zhong pretended to be horrified, "You must not do that," he said, "I'll say the old ghost Du can be considered a rare talent, as long as he does not have any son yet, he must find two genius and outstanding talents like us to be his heirs; at least he could use us to admonish his ministers. If he throws us away for nothing, he is a really big fool [orig. muddled egg]."

After a short pause he sighed and added, "Ay! But you were right too, if he deal with us ruthlessly, if he gives us even half a slap on the face, we will immediately kill ourselves, to teach that evil tyrant Dad a lesson, instead of obtaining the treasure, he will be crushed to death when the while Emperor Guan Temple collapse on him."

Hearing the more he bragged, the farther off-track he was, Xu Ziling was afraid Du Fuwei might see through their charades. "Stop talking," he busily said, "He might catch up with us!"

Kou Zhong pretended to look back, he saw Du Fuwei lowering

his head, so he knew their brilliant scheme was successful; thus he promptly shut his mouth, while in his heart he was so pleased with himself that it was hard to describe his feeling right now.

By dusk that day, the three of them reached a big town called Nanzhi. Du Fuwei found a small inn, but he only booked one room. And then he took the two boys to a small restaurant nearby to have dinner. His manner was a lot more ‘benevolent’ than before.

From the dozen or so tables, only half were occupied. The patrons appeared to be local ‘the haves’.

The three chose a quiet table on the corner. After ordering food and drink, slowly and casually said, “Since the two of you are obedient, you are now allowed to talk.”

Kou Zhong lightly kicked Xu Ziling’s leg under the table. He heaved a sigh and said, “Whatever Die, the Senior, is unwilling to hear, you might as well tell us plainly, so that your sons will not offend you by breaking your taboo, but will seal our lips instead.”

[1] Title chapter original: you hoodwink me, I cheat on you.

Although Du Fuwei was an ambitious and ruthless character of the ‘dark road’ who could kill people without blinking an eye, he was helpless against Kou Zhong. To show that he was

magnanimous, he forced a laugh and said, “As long as you don’t deliberately stir up trouble, why would I be afraid of your talk? The amount of salt I took is more than the grains of rice you have eaten, the number of bridges I crossed is more than the road you have travelled.”

Kou Zhong showed a ‘I beg to differ’ expression, but he did not contradict.

Xu Ziling said in a low voice, “We, two brothers, accept our misfortunes as decreed by fate. Du Zongguan [see Chapter 1], after obtaining the ‘Secret to Long Life’, would you grant us a quick and easy death, and not subject us to prolonged suffering? Ay! Since Niang died, we have always thought about following her to the Yellow Spring [underworld in Chinese Mythology, equivalent to Hades or Hell]. It’s just that we don’t have the courage to kill ourselves!”

Kou Zhong interrupted, “Die, after we die, it would be best if whenever you have spare time, you have your subordinates, the generals, to order those foot soldiers to burn some gold and silver paper[2] for us, so that in the Yellow Spring, Niang and us can live comfortably and in style.”

With these two boys messing around with him, Du Fuwei really did not know whether he should laugh or he should cry. “Who said anything about killing you?” he said with a wry smile.

With a straight face Kou Zhong said, “A ruler’s words is no joking matter; in that case you can’t even harm us.”

Du Fuwei was indeed a wily old fox; he smiled and said, “If you don’t hide anything from me, I, Du Fuwei, will keep my promises [orig. one word worth nine sacred tripods[3]]. In the future I definitely won’t mistreat you.”

The two boys knew he had fallen into their trap. After exchanging a glance, Kou Zhong said with a sigh, “Die’s promise is good enough. Xiao Ling, you may tell him!”

Xu Ziling said, “The entrance to the treasure-trove must be opened in specific way. If Die is willing to swear a heavy oath, guaranteeing that you will not harm even half a hair on our bodies by any method, that you will truly consider us as your sons, then son will tell you the secret.”

Du Fuwei saw a group of men and women just walked in to the restaurant, one of them was an elderly man with an out-of-the-ordinary manner; obviously he was a martial art expert. Du Fuwei nodded and said, “We’ll talk about it later. Let’s eat!”

Following his gaze, Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong also looked toward the door. Four eyes lit up simultaneously.

The new comers were five in total, one old man and four young

people. Each one of them carried either a sword or a saber. The one causing the two boys' eyes to light up was a sixteen or seventeen-year old, budding young girl in the prime of youth, with an exceptionally good-looking countenance.

The old man was short and stout, his bearing looked bold and powerful; as soon as he walked in, his eyes landed squarely on Du Fuwei.

The other three were young men around twenty-year old, their physiques looked heroic and strong, one of them was exceptionally handsome, and taller than the other two. This young man walked side-by-side with the beautiful girl in an intimate manner.

The young girl noticed the two boys, Kou and Xu's marketplace rascal's eyes were sizing her up without blinking, and angry look flitted across her pretty face; she turned her head away in disdain, and pressed closer to the tall and handsome young man's back as they entered the restaurant.

Knowing that they had caught the young girl's attention, the two boys were very excited; they looked at each other and laughed.

Du Fuwei saw everything clearly, but a warm, familiar feeling welled up in his heart.

He was born into a poor family, and since childhood he wasted his time stealing and robbing at the marketplace. He could not even remember how many times he was beaten up because he took liberties with beautiful women.

Later on, after mastering martial art skill, it was his turn to bully other people. But after nearly twenty years of cultivating superior martial art skill and exercising restraint of his sexual desire, he no longer forced himself into a woman. Looking at these two boys' mannerism has evoked his memory.

“Do you want Die to get her as your wife for a few nights?” he asked in low voice.

The two boys jumped in fright. They both shook their hands to refuse. Xu Ziling seriously said, “There is no fun in those who come by coercion; our eyes see but our hands do not move.”

Du Fuwei suddenly started to like these two boys, raising his thumb he said, “Good child!”

The two boys inwardly thought that you curry our favor just to obtain the non-existent secret method to open the treasure-trove! Naturally they did not feel grateful at all. But they still put a happy expression on their face.

Because he saw that the girl was already taken [orig. the flower has a master/owner], plus he was afraid that the girl would provoke disaster from Du Fuwei because of them, Kou Zhong renounced his urge to enjoy the beauty and simply stuffed himself.

“How’s Die’s martial art skill compared to Yuwen Huagu’s?” he asked curiously, “Which one is higher, which one is lower?”

This was the second time Du Fuwei heard him arbitrarily changed Yuwen Huaji’s name to ‘Yuwen Huagu’; he was greatly amused. “Being together with you, two kids, I laughed a lot more than I did for the last ten years added together,” he said, “Later on you must not ask this kind of naïve question. I have never met him nor exchange palms with him, how do I know who’s superior and who’s inferior?”

For the sake of the treasure-trove, he gave this half true and half false answer to entertain them.

Xu Ziling said, “There must be some criteria. For instance, that guy ‘Wu Zun’ Bi Xuan [see Book 1 Chapter 5], or ‘San Zhenren’ Ning Daoqi [see Book 1 Chapter 6]; how many people have actually exchange palms with them? Yet isn’t their rank set up on high?”

With a cold laugh Du Fuwei said, “They are undoubtedly most

outstanding martial art masters of this age; but every generation in the rivers and mountains [i.e. country] produces talents. Who could guarantee that they will occupy that position forever?”

Kou Zhong nodded and said, “Die’s opinion is very insightful. I wonder how many martial art masters in Jianghu are in the same level as you are?”

Seeing he was putting up a grownup manner in deadly earnest, Du Fuwei was not amused. “Quickly eat!” he snapped.

The two boys were highly interested in the discussion, naturally they were quite put off; without any choice they simply go back to eating with heads down.

Du Fuwei has always been highly authoritative in front of his subordinates. It could be said that no one did not respect him or was afraid of him. Who would have thought that these two boys acted like he was their real Dad? In actuality he did not know how to handle these two boys. His heart softened and he said, “If we are talking about the origin of Wulin’s diverse schools and sects, it can roughly divided into north and south, two major systems. It is called ‘southerners put emphasis on simplicity and obtain the essence; northerners delve deeper and exhaust their branch and leaves’. The so-called north and south refers to the north and south of the Great River. South side Wulin always leans toward the esteemed doctrine of metaphysical study [Wei and Jin

philosophical school amalgamating Taoist and Confucian ideals], continuing the so-called Central Plains orthodoxy since the Wei [220-265] and Jin [265-420] dynasties. The north side on the other hand, receives heavy influence of extra-territorial Wulin world; the martial art skills branch into thousand schools ten thousand varieties in innumerable succession. It could be said to be very dynamic and fascinating. But at the highest level, each one has its own distinguishing feature, it's hard to say which one is superior, which one is inferior."

Speaking to this point, he saw, sitting three tables away, the old man's ears were twitching; evidently he was listening to their conversation. In his heart he was a bit wary, since he had already used his inner energy to focus his voice so that it would not spread out. If the opposite side could still hear it, it means this person could be considered a top quality martial art master of the Jianghu.

At other times, Du Fuwei might made his move to try him out, but right now he had an important matter at hand, he was not interested in meddling with any other matters. Therefore, he immediately stopped talking and urged the two boys to eat their fill, and then paid the bill and left.

Patted their belly, Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong followed him out.

As they walked past the girl's table, she suddenly stretched out

her foot and with matchless precision placed it right between Xu Ziling's feet, who was the last in line. She exerted her strength and twisted.

Xu Ziling screamed and stumbled onto Kou Zhong's back. The two of them fell down and rolled on the ground like a gourd.

[2] Hell money or Joss paper, considered currency in the underworld, offered as burnt offerings to the deceased in Chinese culture. (Wikipedia, keyword hell money or joss paper)

[3] Side note: for more on 'tripods', please read Jin Yong's Deer and Cauldron, Chapter 1, translated by yours truly.

This incident caught both sides by surprise. The elderly man yelled, "Wushuang!"

In all his life, Du Fuwei was used to tyrannize other people. He did not come to provoke you, just consider your family and your mountain as blessed. And now someone dared to disgrace the people under his protection in front of his face. Immediately he turned around, his eyes gleaming with murderous aura.

Being stared by him, the girl called Wushuang was a bit afraid, but apparently she was accustomed to being arrogant and willful, hence she still spoke defiantly, "Who told them to stare at people with shifty gaze?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling crawled up awkwardly. Horrified, they both pulled Du Fuwei's right and left arm toward the door. Who would have thought that Du Fuwei did not budge at all? He simply stared coldly at the girl.

Kou Zhong knew Du Fuwei was about to make his move. "Die!" he pleaded, "Let's go! Your sons were wrong."

The elderly man also stood up and cupped his fist, "In this matter my humble niece is wrong, we beg for two Xiao Xiongdi's forgiveness. If you are injured from the fall, we are willing to compensate for the medical bill."

Du Fuwei coldly said, "State your school and background, let's see if I will provoke you or not."

The three young men immediately stood up with their hands on their weapons' hilt, scaring the other patrons that they all left their table in a flurry and huddled in the corner.

The tall and handsome young man proudly said, "My humble father is Liang Shidu of Shuofang, Junior [orig. Wanbei – younger generation, referring to self] is Liang Shunming. Whether you want to provoke us or not, Sire may decide it for yourself."

The other two young men and the girl also showed a proud,

mixed with condescending expression; apparently they were quite proud of Liang Shidu's name.

Du Fuwei's countenance did not change at all; as if nothing had happened, he said, "Turns out Yingyang [soaring hawk] Lang Jiang's [lit. youth general] beloved son. Yingyang Pai [soaring hawk sect] has always been willing to be the imperial court's running dogs [i.e. lackeys]; only recently they saw the wind and set the helm and thus allied themselves with the Tujue [Turkic ethnic group, see Book 1 Chapter 2]. Two female soaring hawks Liang Shifu and Liu Wuzhou have become Tujue's two dogs. Why can't I afford to provoke you?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling have also heard the name Yingyang Pai, they knew it was a well-known big northern sect with impressive reputation. They believed this Liang Shunming must have a real skill; perhaps they could take this opportunity to escape. Hence they no longer said anything but quietly scooted over toward the door.

The elderly man stepped in front of Liang Shunming and the other two young men who had already pulled their weapons out; he said in heavy voice, "Friend, you are experienced and knowledgeable, obviously you are not an ordinary person. May I ask your honorable surname and great given name? And how should I address you?"

Du Fuwei replied indifferently, “Since this kid is Liang Shidu’s son, Sire must be related to Liang Shidu’s sworn brother, Shen Tianqun of Luling. Based on your age, you ought to be Shen Tianqun’s elder brother Shen Naitang, unless my eyes have failed me.”

The elderly man suddenly stood up straight, his beard spread out, his appearance became bold and powerful without equal. Laughing loudly, he replied, “Looks like Friend understood Jianghu matters like the back of your hand, you must not be a nameless character. Why not announce your name? Perhaps we have a little bit of relation.”

“Having a bit of relation’ was a Jianghu terminology, including relation such as enmity.

Du Fuwei threw his head back and let out a long laughter. Yet as soon as he stopped laughing, the cold murderous look returned to his eyes, as he coldly said, “I hope he is not Liang Shidu’s only son; otherwise, his family line will be cutoff.”

Shen Naitang’s countenance changed immediately; it seemed like this person was not intimidated by Liang Shidu and Shen Tianqun, two powerful masters whose names shook Wulin; he must have a very strong background.

Taking a step back, he pulled his broadsword and sternly said,

“Very well! Let me, Shen Naitang, increase my knowledge by experiencing Friend’s real skill.”

Relying on his family skill, Liang Shunming has always been thinking too highly of himself, plus he had his lover standing right next to him, naturally he could not stand it anymore. Moving along with Shen Naitang, he launched the Yingyang Pai’s famous Soaring Hawk Sword Technique, thrusting his sword toward Du Fuwei’s chest with half-real, half-fake stance. It was definitely not an ordinary move.

Shen Naitang also had confidence in him, he moved aside and stood ready to give him assistance.

Unexpectedly Du Fuwei still had time to look back toward Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling and said with a laugh, “Yingyang Pai is located in the north; therefore, they are heavily influenced by Tujue martial techniques. They rely mainly on ruthless attack, strong offense but not strong defense; therefore, if in one attack they fail to down the opponent, they could only take the beating.”

In the meantime, Liang Shunming’s sword was already less than three cun from his chest; suddenly it changed form, the fake became real, and went straight up toward Du Fuwei’s throat. It was indeed a ruthless attack.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stared with eyes wide open. On one

hand they wanted Liang Shunming's sword to kill Du Fuwei, on the other hand they did not wish to see him fallen from power like this. It was a very conflicting thought.

It was only this time that Du Fuwei finally reacted; tossing his head backward, his sleeve flicked forward.

'Ding!' Surprisingly, it was the clear ringing of metal clashing against metal.

While everybody was still puzzled, Liang Shunming's body was severely shaken. As his sword was struck by an unknown object and was swept away, his defense was widely open. Du Fuwei bent his body on the waist, and fast as lightning his leg flew toward Liang Shunming's crotch. Apparently his objective was to cut his family line.

Seeing this, Shen Naitang's countenance underwent huge changes. It was only then did he realize the opponent was the dark road overlord Du Fuwei, whose nickname was 'universe in his sleeve' [orig. 'qiankun', also means heaven and earth/yin and yang].

Du Fuwei had a pair of arm guards about a chi [Chinese foot, approx. 1ft or 1/3m] long hidden inside his sleeve, with which he could injure his opponent by using it in a surprise attack. The reason he was using it in the very first move was because he had

determined to kill these people to shut their mouth.

Since Shen Naitang knew it was him, how could he dare to be confident? With a roar he brandished his broadsword while charging forward, his target was the left side of Du Fuwei's neck.

Du Fuwei let out a cold snort, the other arm guard in his left sleeve flashed, it collided with Shen Naitang's blade, but his kick was not affected at all.

Liang Shunming knew the situation was far from good, unleashing everything he had, his left palm pressed downward, while taking a step back simultaneously.

'Bang!' Liang Shunming let out a muffled grunt. Although he managed to block Du Fuwei's kick, he was unable to block the shocking qi surging into his body from Du Fuwei's foot. His mouth spurted fresh blood, while his body was thrown backward.

After exchanging one strike with him, Shen Naitang was also forced to take half a step back. "Get Liang Gongzi [young master] out of here!" he bellowed.

Who would have thought that as Wushuang and her martial brothers Meng Chang and Meng Ran, three people saw Liang Shunming was falling toward them, they automatically reached out to hold him, but felt as if Liang Shunming weighed a thousand

catties [approx. 1/2kg or 1lb]? Although they were able to receive him head on, they were unable to withstand the impulse; four people fell back together, crashing onto the tables and chairs behind them that everything was shattered in pieces, the people and the cups, plates, and the food and drink inside them fell into a mess. It was a really sorry sight.

Du Fuwei let out a cold laugh. His sleeves shot out, with either the sleeve or the arm guard, he attacked Shen Naitang relentlessly that the latter was powerless to retaliate.

Fortunately, Shen Naitang's foundation was quite solid; his martial art skill was also quite strong that for the time being he was still able to hold his ground.

By this time Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had already reached the door. After giving each other eye signals, they dashed out madly from the restaurant.

Du Fuwei had never expected that these two obedient sons, who kept calling him Dad left and right, would seize the opportunity to slip away. Anger and anxiety attacked his mind, his offensive suddenly lost quite a bit of momentum, so that Shen Naitang was able to reclaim a little bit of advantage.

Seeing Shen Naitang was able to prolong the channeling of his qi, Du Fuwei knew that he would not be able to kill the opponent

within ten moves. After considering the pros and cons, he decided he'd better capture the two boys first and come back later to kill these people to shut their mouth.

With a loud roar he forced Shen Naitang to withdraw two steps back, while he himself floated out of the door.

Meanwhile Shen Wushuang and the others were helping Liang Shunming, who had received internal injury, to stand up. They thought that once again Shen Naitang had displayed his divine power to repel the enemy. To their shock, however, as soon as Shen Naitang was able to stabilize himself, he was forced to withdraw three more steps while 'wah!' he spurted a mouthful of fresh blood.

Shen Wushuang abandoned Liang Shunming, leaving him with her two martial brothers, while she herself rushed toward Shen Naitang and grabbed his arms. "Dabo! [paternal uncle, older than one's father] What happened?"

Shen Naitang took a deep breath, while wiping the blood on the corner of his mouth with his sleeve. "This man is 'universe in his sleeve' Du Fuwei," he said in heavy tone, "Even if your Die came here personally, I am afraid he is still not his match. We must leave immediately."

Book 2 Chapter 3 – Acting Without Thinking

When Du Fuwei pursued outside the restaurant, he saw all the lanterns along this shady street were still shining brightly. It was only then did he realize that this was the red-light district; most of the brothels in this town were concentrated here, the sound of people and carriages still lingered in the air.

Without thinking he dashed into a side alley, jumped onto the roof, focused his eyes and ears, and tried to listen with all his might, while at the same time unleashed his lightness skill to fly over houses and jumped over the roof. In just a short period of time he had already been around several streets in a big circle. But he still did not see the two little demons, neither did he hear hurried footsteps of people running away.

With Du Fuwei's ability, he still suffered a big headache.

He had already made a prompt decision of leaving the enemy and running out to pursue, yet he was still too late to intercept these two boys. He knew the boys were exceedingly smart, they must have hidden someplace nearby. Unless he could search

every place within a hundred zhang radius, he could forget about ever finding them.

While running around, he could not stop cursing his own stupidity; if from the beginning he controlled them by sealing their acupoints, without any care whether he would hurt them or not, all these maddening things would not have happened.

Could it be that he had lost his mind that he made such a gross miscalculation? It was really unlike his usual style of always make thorough planning on everything.

He sighed, and then jumped back to the ground to carry out his search operation.

Meanwhile, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, two boys had just stepped into a low-grade brothel more than ten buildings away.

Naturally it was Kou Zhong's crafty idea. Because common sense dictates that they would run as far away as possible. But if they do that, Du Fuwei only had to grab any passerby and asked, and he would immediately know the direction these two boys were running madly. Besides, Fu Junchuo once told them that martial art masters are also experts in following a trail. Therefore, they deliberately did the opposite. They looked for the most crowded place nearby, and mingled among the crowd. Naturally it led them into this 'Piao Xiang [floating fragrance]' Courtyard.

But their clothes and down-and-out appearance gave the people no reason to compliment them. Upon entering the gate, they were immediately intercepted by four bouncers who looked like they were also the bodyguards of somebody important. “We are full!” one of them shouted, “Please go someplace else.”

Kou Zhong giggled and put his hand into his pocket. It was only then did he recall that in his anxiety to rescue Xu Ziling and thought that he would not return alive, he had generously donated all his silver to Susu. Thereupon he hurriedly slapped Xu Ziling’s arm.

Having known each other so well, naturally Xu Ziling understood what the slap means. He took out a few pieces of silver and stuffed it into one the men’s hand, while saying with a laugh, “Our father and all our five uncles are government officials in Yangzhou. This time we came with our [paternal] uncle to do some shopping here. Serve us well, and you will be heavily rewarded.”

Looking at the silver in his hand, the man smiled and said, “Shaoye [young master[1]] please follow Xiaoren [little/lowly one, referring to self].”

Greatly delighted, the two boys stepped into the hall. The procuress, who dressed like an old demon, stepped out to meet them. As soon as the two boys saw her, they sucked in a mouthful

of air; thinking that just by looking at this old procuress, they knew that compared to the 'Zui Feng Lou' [drunken wind balcony; actually, lou means multi-story building], this brothel was several levels below. But this time escaping with their lives was a more pressing matter, so they could not be bothered by it.

When the procuress saw them, she immediately frowned as well. Not because the smell of their mother's milk had not dried yet, because she had seen a lot of patrons even younger than they were, but because it was the very first time that she saw customers that looked like they have not taken a bath in a year, with their unkempt hair and filthy face.

The procuress stared mercilessly at the bouncer and without any trace of politeness said, "Ah Yuan, what's going on here?"

Grinning, Xu Ziling offered her some silver. Who would have thought that the procuress did not even cast him a glance? "Rules are rules," she said in disdain, "Didn't you see the sign at the main entrance, 'No proper attire, no service'? If you want our Piao Xiang Courtyard girls to entertain you, go home, take a bath and change your clothes; then you can come back!"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling thought: wasn't her request the same as asking for their life? Giggling, Kou Zhong said, "The reason we came here other than to spend money is exactly to find a place to take a bath and change our clothes."

Puzzled, the procuress asked, “You don’t have even half a bundle, where will the change of clothes come from?”

Kou Zhong calmly turned to Xu Ziling and said, “Xiongdi, please give this Dage a lot of money so that he can buy two sets of clothes for us.”

Xu Ziling reluctantly took out a quarter of all the silver in his possession and handed it to the man. The man and the procuress immediately broke into smiles.

After the man left, still with a big smile on her face, the procuress accepted Xu Ziling’s tip and said respectfully, “Shaoye please follow Nujia [female slave, referring to self].”

When the two boys heard her, whose face was covered in heavy rouge, whose bloody mouth wide open like a sacrificial bowl, saying the two words ‘nujia’, the hair on their entire body stood on its end; they looked at each other and smiled bitterly.

Just as they were about to step forward, a chirpy oriole-like voice came from behind, “Chen Daniang [aunt, father’s older brother’s wife]! Which auntie are these two Gongzi looking for?”

All three of them turned around in surprise. They saw a beautiful, lively girl stood behind them. Behind the girl stood a quiet maid and two bodyguards. The girl stared coyly and smiled

flirtatiously at the two boys; her posture was extremely provocative in a loose way.

The girl had a fair skin, youthful and tender, her figure shapely, her face elegant, dazzling and beautiful. Even in Yangzhou, which was well-known for its prostitutes, this kind of youthful glow, which was without 'broken flower, withered willow' feel at all, was extremely rare.

The two boys stared blankly at her, while that Auntie Chen immediately stepped forward to greet her, beaming with joy. "Turns out it's Qingqing, my obedient daughter," she cooed, "Lu Daye has been waiting for you the whole night."

Qingqing looked at Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling up and down several times. "Pfft!" she giggled and said, "The sky has just turned dark, how could they wait for me the whole night? But if they still want to continue waiting, they will wait the whole night." She spoke while walking over toward the two boys, and circled around them in great interest.

"Is this the first time you two boys come to this place?" she asked, "Just now Nujia saw you outside, but I was inside the carriage, so you did not see me."

Auntie Chen put on her best smiling face; she came over with a forced laugh, "The two Gongzi are here to visit the bathhouse.

Why don't my Qingqing be a good girl and greet Lu Daye, huh?"

Qingqing let out a tender snort and said, "Tonight your Miss only want to accompany these two Gongzi." Reaching out to grab the two boys' arms, she said, "Come! Follow me!"

She turned to her maid and ordered her to get some bath supplies, leaving the procuress stood in the hall while staring blankly at her.

The two boys exchanged glances, they were both very excited with their luck that has just flown in; they thought that if their virginity was destroyed by this kind of woman, it was certainly worth it.

However, they had just left the hall, the smiling expression on Qingqing's face immediately vanished without a trace. Pushing the two boys through a long corridor, they arrived at the bathhouse; turns out it was a hot spring bath.

Qingqing pushed the two boys in and coldly said, "Go take a bath!"

The two boys were still stunned when the maid arrived with bath towel and other bathing supplies. Qingqing took one set and pushed it into Xu Ziling's hands. With a wooden expression she said, "Take your time! No need to hurry!" And then she turned

around and left. She even closed the door.

While the two boys were still staring blankly at the closed door, they heard Qingqing's nervous voice outside, "Has Huang Gongzi arrived?" And then they heard the sound of footsteps going farther and farther away.

They suddenly realized that they were being used by this girl. Kou Zhong angrily threw the towel and everything else on the floor.

The two boys looked at each other, and then almost simultaneously they doubled up in laughter; they laughed so hard that they were nearly out of breath, with tears flowing down their face.

[1] I feel that I need to explain this 'young master' term more. Shao means 'younger' or 'lesser', while Ye means 'master', as in 'master-servant' or 'superior-subordinate' relationship (Laoye, old master, Daye, big master, Shaoye, young master]. The other term is Gongzi, which is a polite term to refer to young men in general. I figure it is similar to 'Master' in old English literature, like Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol, where Scrooge addressed Bob Cratchit's son as 'Master'. Example would be last chapter, where Shen Naitang addressed Liang Shunming as 'Gongzi'.

Half a day later the two boys happily immersed themselves in

the tepid water, washing away the dirt, getting rid of the disgrace. Kou Zhong said with a laugh, “We must have violated Peach Blossom Fiend[2] tonight; first we were tripped by that unruly girl that we tumbled down, then this unruly woman is using us as a bridge. With all these bad luck, the only consolation is that we recover our freedom and preserve our little lives.”

Xu Ziling shook his head as he said with a laugh, “Judging from the Ol’ Du’s foot strength, right now he must be a hundred li away. And when he still cannot find us, he would think that our qinggong [lightness skill] is more formidable than his. Ah! Not right!”

The two boys’ countenance changed. They both realized that if Du Fuwei could not catch up with them, he would come back to search for them here.

‘Knock! Knock!’ Suddenly there was a knock on the door.

The two boys immediately slid down underwater.

“Gongzi! The clothes are here!”

Greatly delighted, the two boys jumped out of the pool, opened the door, took the clothes, hurriedly put them on, and then slipped out the door and walked back toward the rear courtyard.

From all around the courtyard their ears were assaulted by the sound of music and singing, the clamor of people laughing and talking, plus the hooting of people playing finger-guessing game and betting on drinks; it was certainly very noisy and lively. Unfortunately the two boys felt as if they lived in a big cold earth where there was no prospect of life; they were not the least bit affected by the gaiety of the world around them.

Yet they were still unaware that Du Fuwei has just stepped into the main gate of this pleasure house.

The two boys dodged to the left and slipped to the right, finally they reached the rear courtyard. But as soon as they looked around, their hearts sank, because the entire backyard was surrounded by solid, impenetrable tall wall [orig. not one drop can trickle through], more than two zhang high. The only way out was via an iron gate; to them, it was tantamount to a big prison where 'the heavens was the only way out'.

Kou Zhong threw himself toward the iron gate. But when he felt the lock with his hand, he was shaken, "My mother!" he exclaimed, "Who sawed the padlock?"

Xu Ziling was greatly delighted. "Who cares?" he said, "Let's go!"

Kou Zhong carelessly tossed the broken padlock and then he forced the door open. Two boys slipped out and reclosed the gate.

While they were still thinking which direction to take, they heard hoof beats. A horse-drawn carriage came out from the shadow across the street. The man driving the carriage called out, "Qingqing! Get in the carriage!"

The two boys were stunned. And then it suddenly dawned on them that Qingqing was going to elope with her sweetheart.

In the meantime the man driving the carriage had seen clearly that they were not Qingqing and her maid; surprised, he halted the carriage.

Kou Zhong waved at him and laughed. Then he and Xu Ziling slipped away into a small lane on the opposite side. But they were only taking two steps when he suddenly stopped, pulled Xu Ziling along, and whispered, "I have a great idea!"

"Under the carriage!" Xu Ziling excitedly replied.

The two boys slapped their hands together and then turned around and hurry back.

The iron gate was opening again, Qingqing and her maid, who

by this time have worn men's clothing, darted out the door and into the carriage.

That 'Huang Gongzi' lightly tapped the horsewhip onto the horse's buttocks, the carriage started moving, and very soon it started accelerating.

Right this moment Du Fuwei had just flown over the wall overlooking the rear courtyard; he saw the carriage moving away. Immediately he exerted his true qi, and jumped into the air. Like a shooting star he flew toward the carriage, and landed about ten zhang behind it. Right away he ran after the carriage.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling saw Du Fuwei's frightening long legs were getting nearer and nearer; they were so scared that they did not dare to breathe.

Du Fuwei increased his speed and flew toward the window. Focusing his eyes, he looked through the carriage screen and into the dark cabin. As soon as he saw that they were not Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, he somersaulted and jumped onto the roof of a nearby building to scan the surrounding for fear that the two boys have run far away.

By the time the two boys were breathing a sigh of relief, the carriage had just passed the big board above the city gate, and galloped onward on the official road.

The carriage stopped. Qingqing got out of the carriage door, and sat on the driver seat next to that 'Huang Gongzi'. Next, the two boys heard kissing sound.

Under the carriage, the two boys were greatly envious.

After half a day, 'Huang Gongzi' said, "Do you have it?"

Immensely proud of herself, Qingqing replied, "Of course. I earned these pearls, jewels and money, naturally I am taking everything away."

Under the carriage, Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "Turns out he is just a dirty old man who swindles money and sex; shall we take a bit of advantage [orig. lead away a goat in passing]?"

Xu Ziling shook his head resolutely. "I don't want this kind of 'butchering-meat' money," he said, "Don't forget Niang's expectation on us."

A bit nervous, Qingqing said, "Can't we move a bit faster? Those underlings of Xie Laoda have fast horses."

The carriage suddenly turned from the official road and continued galloping on the open plain.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were holding on tight with their hands and feet on the axles. As the carriage traveled along a bumpy field, they were shaken and tossed around so hard that they could not hold on anymore.

Qingqing suddenly asked in horror, "Where are you going?"

'Huang Gongzi' replied, "I don't know why the carriage is particularly slow today. Let us hide in the forest ahead for a while, and then after the pursuing party passed by, we can continue our journey."

Qingqing did not understand. "Didn't we prepare a boat ahead? Aren't we going to board the boat and sail to Poyang? How can we change our plan so easily?"

By this time the carriage had pulled into the forest. That 'Huang Gongzi' had Qingqing lighted two wind lanterns. After galloping along a short stretch of road, he stopped the carriage.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling could not hold on anymore, they let go and fell onto the grassy ground underneath the carriage.

Huang Gongzi's 'hey hey' wanton laughter was heard from above. "Come!" he said lecherously, "We nothing to do anyway; let's get intimate inside the carriage."

Qingqing angrily responded, "Presently others are frightened and nervous, how can I have the mood? Besides, Xi'er is inside."

"What are you afraid of?" Huang Gongzi replied, "Sooner or later Xi'er will be mine too!"

From the front, the two people entered the carriage.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were crawling to stand up. They were about to leave when suddenly from inside the carriage they heard the rustling noise of people struggling, followed by Xi'er's shrieking, "Let go of my Miss!"

The two boys were startled; they did not expect that not only this Huang Gongzi wanted to swindle money and sex, he also wanted to commit murder. Quickly they sprang up and open the carriage door by force, and just in time to see Huang Gongzi was strangling Qingqing's throat, while Xi'er has been pushed down by him into the corner.

Kou Zhong rushed inside and punched Huang Gongzi's back. Huang Gongzi howled in pain and thus his hand loosened.

Xu Ziling grabbed the bun of his hair, with some supernatural power that he did not know he had, he pulled Huang Gongzi's entire body and threw him outside the carriage without too much

trouble.

This man obviously did not know martial art, being punched and kicked by the two boys, he was unable to crawl back up for half a day. “Hero, please spare my life!” he said in quivering voice.

Qingqing stroked her throat while coughing incessantly. With a choked voice she called out, “Stop hitting him!”

The two boys were taken aback. “Don’t you know he wanted to take your money as well as your life?” Kou Zhong asked.

Qingqing nodded. She hastily walked over to give Huang Gongzi’s handsome face several fierce kicks. Finally she sat slumped on the ground dejectedly and angrily shouted, “Get lost!”

Blood had already filled Huang Gongzi’s face; hearing her, it was as if he had just received the Emperor’s pardon. Rolling and crawling he entered the forest, away from the reach of the lantern lights.

By this time the pretty maid Xi’er was helping Qingqing up. Four people, eight eyes met, nobody knew what to say.

Qingqing’s erect breasts rose and fell continuously. Staring at the two boys, her countenance turned ugly as she said, “It’s you!”

Stunned, Kou Zhong said, “Is that how you treat your benefactors who have just saved your life?”

Qingqing stomped her foot, “Even if I am killed, it’s none of your, two little demons’ business.”

Xi’er could not put up with it any longer, she shook Qingqing’s arm and said, “Miss! They are good people!”

Qingqing’s eyes were brimming with tears, yet she was still throwing tantrums, “I don’t care!” she said, “Get lost!”

The two boys felt really awkward. Xu Ziling still gave her earnest and well-meaning advice, “If you know how to ride a horse, just untie the horse pulling the carriage, then you can go a bit faster.”

Throwing his arm around Kou Zhong’s shoulder, with the other arm he waved, and then walked away.

Qingqing threw herself on the ground, crying, “I don’t want those two little demons despise me! I am so angry I want to die!”

Xi’er was still looking at the direction the two boys went. The dark and dense forest seemed to extend far away endlessly. In her heart she mused that after taking a bath, those two boys actually looked better-looking than that Huang Gongzi; no

wonder her Miss, who has always been strong-willed and eager to win at everything, did not wish for them to see her falling into misfortune like this.

[2] Peach Blossom Fiend: I am not too clear about this; it has something to do with astrology, used to describe bad love entanglement.

Book 2 Chapter 4 – Great Scheme Of Acquiring Wealth

After walking for more than twenty days in the southeastern direction, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, the pair that was hard to differentiate which one was older and which one was younger, arrived at Yuhang [district, Hangzhou, Zhejiang], a big county town by the sea.

After having their stomach full, Kou Zhong said, “Now that everybody is after our treasure-trove, which make famous, if we roam the Jianghu without training exceptional divine skill first, we might have a miserable or even tragic ending. But if we look for a place to hide and shrink our heads like a turtle, not only we won’t achieve what Niang was hoping for us, we will never be able to kill Yuwen Huagu either. What do you think we should do?”

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “I really wish to see Li Dage and Susu Jiejie; but Gaoyou is so close to Yangzhou. That old muddled-egg Du Fuwei must be in Yangzhou doing some treasure hunt; there is a pretty good chance we will come across him!”

He sighed again before continuing, “Now we have only a little silver left, and I am tired of picking other people’s pocket. We don’t even have a place to stay, what do you want me to do?”

Kou Zhong’s eyes lit up. “Li Dage must have thought that we are dead; how could he wait for us at Gaoyou?” he said, “You are right, right now we have to get some money; otherwise, how can we have enough travel expense to go to Luoyang to look for He Clan’s Jade Annulus?”

“Do you have good idea on how to make a fortune?” Xu Ziling asked happily.

Kou Zhong already had the answer, “All great schemes to acquire wealth are inevitably linked to set your hand on it when the price is low, and let it go when the price is high. This is a salt-producing area. As long as we buy his granny’s cart of salt and smuggle his bird’s [must be swear word like ‘his granny’] into inland area where there is shortage of salt, we can exchange salt to money just like gold. At that time when we practice Li Dage’s Bloody Battle Ten-Style, we won’t need to use ridiculous tree branches.”

“Do you know a place where salt is scarce?” Xu Ziling wondered.

Kou Zhong’s eyes flitted toward a table on the left side of the

wine shop; he said in low voice, “Look, that girl is so cute!”

Xu Ziling was more worried over their livelihood [orig. firewood and grain of rice]; he was not interested even to look. “Come on!” he urged.

Kou Zhong put on an air of importance; pointing to his own noggin he said, “The most useful thing in the world is a smart mind. Right now the Ol’ Du has cut off the river route along the Great River. Unless people with power and influence like Song Clan, nobody has the ability to transport salt to the region west of Liyang. Therefore, if we can ship his bird’s one cart of salt over there, even if we have to set up a stall on the ground [fig. to start up a new business], we will earn a bowl full, a basin full of profit. Come! If you want to get rich, come with me!”

After paying the bill, the two left the wine shop. They asked around where the salt wholesale place was, and immediately set out on their mission.

Xu Ziling wavered. “We have financial resources to buy salt,” he said, “But where would we find the money to buy a mule cart?”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “You did not seem to have heard of a reliable means of transportation called the wheelbarrow[1]. Come on!”

The two boys walked for half a sichen [reminder: 1 sichen = 2 hours] before reaching the dock outside the town. They saw boundless ocean extending indefinitely in front of them. This was the first time they saw ocean that they were dumbstruck.

Kou Zhong breathed out a mouthful of cold air as he said, “It would be better if we could steal a boat and then go to the other side of the ocean to take a look. Based on our skill, maybe we can be the emperor of another country; at that time, it won’t be a problem for us to take a dozen concubines.”

As far as his eyes could see, Xu Ziling saw countless ships and boats, the masts were like a forest, and there were hundreds, if not thousands, of porters loading and unloading the boats, with merchants and travelers coming and going in unending stream; it was really bustling with noise and excitement.

Pushing along Kou Zhong, who was still having a longing look on his eyes, he said, “Getting rich is more important, let’s go!”

The two boys joined the throng. They saw not only all kinds of Jianghu personalities, they also saw a lot of government officers mingling among the crowd.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were unsure whether there were wanted notices on them in this place; seeing the officers, they tried to avoid them as far as possible.

Soon afterwards they reached the street where the most famous salt distribution center was located. There were more than a dozen large, spacious stores with open areas where row after row of salt were on display. These stores were built against the sea, behind these stores were the piers, where big cargo ships and small boats were moored.

There were over a dozen shops, but each and every one of those shops was jam-packed with people. The salt piled up like a mountain, it was so cheap that it looked like one could just take a sack or half sack without paying anything.

Encountering this kind of situation, the two boys merely stood timidly. After some argument, Xu Ziling was elected as the designated negotiator. They decided on an elderly gentleman standing behind the counter, doing some calculation with an abacus.

With great difficulty Xu Ziling squeezed himself through the crowd, and then clearing his throat, he said, “Laoban [boss]! We want to buy your goods.”

Without even looking up, the elderly gentleman replied coldly, “For the next three months all the goods here have been pre-ordered. Which store are you from?”

While Xu Ziling was at a loss and did not know how to answer, Kou Zhong pushed him from behind and said, “Let’s go to different store!”

The elderly gentleman acted as if he was not even aware of their existence; he continued concentrating on his abacus.

A man leaning against the counter stared at them coldly; he said, “Two Xiao Xiongdi looked unfamiliar; are you from out of town?”

Xu Ziling nodded, “We are from out of town,” he replied.

The elderly gentleman mumbled, “Ol’ Liu, if you want to gossip, get out of the shop, don’t obstruct people picking up their order here.

Ol’ Liu winked at the two boys, and led them out of the shop and onto the street, where he sized them up and down, and then with a condescending manner said, “Looks to me you came here to buy goods, thinking that you can transport it inland to make a fortune. It’s just that I rarely see someone as young as you are doing it. How much money do you have?”

Since childhood Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling grew up in the marketplace, how could they not know that they have met a swindler? Shaking their head, they turned around to leave.

Ol' Liu's countenance suddenly changed. He blocked their path and said menacingly, "You think you can go that easily?"

'Bang!' Kou Zhong's fist landed on his lower abdomen.

Immediately Ol' Liu doubled up in pain like a shrimp, and then he dropped on his knees with his hands on his stomach, followed by his entire body slumped on the ground; he did not even have any strength to groan.

One after another the people nearby scattered to avoid them.

Xu Ziling looked at Kou Zhong's fist; he gasped, "When did your fist become that formidable?"

Following his gaze, Kou Zhong also looked at his own fist; stunned, he said, "Could it be because I have mastered the first level of Nine Mysteries Great Method that I am one sixth as formidable as Niang?"

Noticing that hundreds of eyes were looking at them, while this Ol' Liu's life and death was still unclear as he was still lying on the ground and became an eye-sore, Xu Ziling pulled Kou Zhong away into the crowd, which automatically made way for them.

They were just about to enter another salt store to try their luck

when from behind someone called out, “Two Xiao Xiongdi, please hold your steps!”

The two boys knew that trouble has arrived; they stopped and turned around.

They saw three men wearing dark green clothes walking toward them in triangular formation. The man taking the lead was about thirty, with straightforward appearance. His manner and movement indicated that he was a man who was used to run amuck.

However, this time his face carried a smiling expression as he cupped his fist and said, “I am Tan Yong, the Fu Duozhu [vice helmsman] of the Hai Sha Bang [sea sand gang] Yuhang division. Seeing two Xiao Xiongdi’s skill and toughness, my heart itches to make friends with you. What do you say we find a place where laoge [old brother] can play a host to you?”

The two boys felt he was giving them a lot of face, but at the same time they realized that they had offended an underworld gang member, so nothing good would come out of this.

Xu Ziling shook his head and said, “We still need to hurry to buy some goods to do business.”

Tan Yong quickly came over, “If two Xiao Xiongdi want to buy

salt, you need not bother to waste your time. Let's not talk about all the goods here have already been divided up among a dozen big firms, even if someone is willing to sell some to you, not only the gangs [orig. 'bang hui', clan/gang and society] will want their share, the officers will want their share, the authorities will want their share, and lastly you have to pay salt tax. In short, for a hundred hard work, the profit is not enough to spend three days in a low-grade brothel, and I mean the cheapest rural town low-grade brothel."

Hearing this, the boys' two hearts sank to the bottom. Wouldn't their great scheme of acquiring wealth result in nothing?

Tan Yong laughed and said, "Come!"

The two boys exchanged glances, and then they followed him to a small restaurant nearby to sit down. Tan Yong introduced his subordinates first, the other two men, to them, one was called Xie Feng, the other Chen Gui, before casually asked the two boys' background.

Kou Zhong answered all his questions, but naturally he gave him fabricated answers. He wanted to be a Wulin's martial art master, but he has not climbed up that high yet. However, speaking about lying, even Du Fuwei was duped by him, much less Tan Yong, who was practically a nobody; of course they believed everything he said without any doubt.

He believed the two boys were Fu Zhong and Fu Ling, that their martial art skill was handed down in their family from generation to generation, and that currently they were looking for an opportunity to make money by becoming daring small-caliber gangsters.

[1] I found an interesting article on Chinese wheelbarrow, which is different from modern wheelbarrows, here:

<http://www.lowtechmagazine.com/2011/...eelbarrow.html>

Tan Yong seemed to be satisfied. “Other than using your palm and fist, what kind of weapon can you use?” he asked.

Xu Ziling patted his chest, “We use sabers,” he replied, “A dozen or so men cannot do anything to us.”

Tan Yong was a bit skeptical, “Is it possible for me to test Xiao Xiongdi’s saber skill?” he asked.

Kou Zhong arrogantly replied, “Real gold is not afraid of red fire. But it would be better if Tan Ye [master] tell us your business first. Man’s life on earth is nothing more than to seek riches. I am sure Tan Ye also understands this logic ... Ha!”

Tan Yong laughed aloud. He said, “As soon as I saw two Xiao Xiongdi, I feel like I’ve known you for a long time. Wealth is just material thing, Xiongdi wants money, you will get money, Xiongdi

wants women, you will get women. Let us go back and meet our Duo Zhu [helmsman[2]]; after we become real sworn brothers later, anything you don't like, you can just let me know."

Kou Zhong was very familiar with the way the dark road gang people worked just like his own ten toes. With a giggle he leaned over and whispered in Tan Yong's ear, "Tan Ye noticed that we are from out of town, also we are just two kids who are still wet behind the ears; therefore, you want us to join your Haisha Gang to kill people from other gang. Afterwards, you push the blame away, neat and clean. Hey! This is called 'black pot can crush people dead'."

Tan Yong was immediately as dumb as a wooden chicken. Even Jianghu veteran like Tan Yong was caught unprepared and was unable to respond, because more or less what Kou Zhong said was exactly why he wanted to win the two boys over. It was as if Kou Zhong was the worm in his belly. Naturally there was considerable difference in the ins and outs of this matter.

Kou Zhong patted Xu Ziling's shoulder. "Xiongdi!" he said, "Let's go!"

Tan Yong turned around and called out, "Hold on!"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling thought that from ashamed, he was going to fly into a rage; hence they stood close together, ready to

fight.

Xie Feng and Chen Gui's eyes were also gleaming with ominous glint; they were ready to make their move.

But Tan Yong sighed and said with a wry smile, "Fu Xiaodi is really formidable. It would be better if I speak openly ..."

Kou Zhong cut him off, "You must not say it. If you do, according to Jianghu rule, we can't forget of getting away."

Xu Ziling also laughed aloud and said, "We two brothers entering the Jianghu and making our names relying only on our skill; we have never considered relying on any patron."

Hearing this, Tan Yong, three people were dumbstruck. These two boys possessed absolute sophistication that did not match their age; they were really impressed.

Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling away. After cupping their fist in salute, they no longer care about the three people, they simply turned around and left.

Reaching the street, the two boys were a little apprehensive, without thinking their feet took them back to the piers.

This time suddenly they saw a big ship far away coming near,

and was met by two government boats. It appeared that these two boats have been waiting for the big ship.

For some reason the big ship attracted the two boys' attention, mainly because both the external shape and the flag exuded exoticism.

As the big boat docked, immediately they saw people appearing on the deck, but since the boat was far away, they could not see clearly. It was not until a government official, escorted by four officers, climbed up the ship on a rope ladder that the two boys regained their vision.

Kou Zhong wrapped his arm around Xu Ziling's shoulder; he sighed and said, "Doing normal business is really not easy. Turns out people who can strike it rich are unscrupulous businessmen who completely lack righteousness and justice. Ha! I have another great idea. Tonight we come back here and steal his bird's boat of salt, and then we slip away quietly. This way we could even save those few coins."

Xu Ziling's heart was moved, "They have so much salt," he said, "We stealing a dozen sacks will not make them bankrupt! Let's steal from that shop just now! Thinking about that shopkeeper makes me angry."

Seeing he agreed, Kou Zhong was delighted. "Now that's my

good brother indeed,” he said, “But being a thief we must have thief’s equipment; for example, steel wire to pick locks, weapons to protect ourselves, bunch of ropes, and so on. Our future rice and porridge will depend on this endeavor.”

“You are the one who came up with the thief idea, naturally you must be the one who has to take care of all these things,” Xu Ziling said.

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “Joined together we are strong, divided we are weak. In this world we two brothers only have each other, certainly you don’t want me to rush about alone, tiring me so much that tonight I can’t even move my legs, and then Ling Di [younger brother], you will have to be the thief alone.”

Xu Ziling was already accustomed to his schemes; he was just joking with him. Kou Zhong has always cherished his little brother so much, but from time to time he could not help taking a bit of advantage of him.

While Xu Ziling was about to speak, he suddenly realized that Kou Zhong had his eyes fixed to their left, while his countenance underwent a great change.

Xu Ziling promptly turned his head and saw a group of perhaps forty, fifty people that looked like ruffians and thugs, dressed in

porter attire; in their hands they had sharp hooks, pointy sticks, shoulder poles, and the like. These people were heading their direction, and the one leading them was, not surprisingly, that Ol' Liu. The two boys' escape route was completely blocked.

The people on the docks immediately scattered away like flying chicken or running dogs; several government officers included. Apparently the situation was beyond the reach of the law.

Kou Zhong sucked in a mouthful of cold air. "Xiao Ling!" he said, "Did Niang ever teach us how to fight barehanded against naked blades?"

Xu Ziling had never seen such a big mob; he shook his head.

And then, with a loud shout the two of them turned around and ran for their lives along the pier toward the ocean.

The thugs' battle cry shook the heavens as they also ran after them in wild chase. The situation was extremely chaotic.

Evidently the two boys were able to run faster than the bunch of thugs; they swung to the left and swayed to the right among the piles of salt, passing over the people running away in all direction, and in a blink of an eye reached the seaside.

Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling toward the big ship that has just

arrived and was anchored to the dock. If the ship belonged to some foreign envoys, naturally there would be some important people [orig. have face] on board; chances are these thugs would not dare to pursue them up.

In a flash these two boys covered a distance of close to a hundred zhang before they finally reached the rope ladder. Not having enough time to hesitate, they desperately climbed onto the ship.

The ladder was approximately five zhang high; very soon they reached the top. Suddenly four swords blocked their way, while someone shouted angrily, "Get lost!"

The two boys turned their heads to look down, and saw a lot of the thugs have already caught up with them at the bottom of the ladder. It was indeed a case of 'no way out ahead, pursuing troops behind'. The only way was to jump into the sea.

While they were groaning inwardly, they faintly heard a tender, melodious female voice coming from above, "Let those two come aboard!"

Someone replied, "Yes! Madame!"

The swords moved away.

The two boys felt as if they had just been granted the Emperor's pardon, and quickly climbed the rest of the way up.

They had just reached the deck when the hands behind them started to move. The four men wearing white warrior outfit hacked, chopped and sliced the pursuing thugs as if they were chopping melon or cutting vegetables so that they fell from the rope ladder, and had to jump to the sea.

The rest of the thugs were so scared that they turned around and ran back toward the pier, nobody dared to climb up the ship anymore.

There was no one on the deck other than the four warriors; they did not even see the Madame that has just let them got on board.

The two boys breathed a sigh of relief, inwardly happy that they were able to snatch their little life back. They did not forget to look down at the Ol' Liu and the others who were shouting and making a racket at the dock, and waved their hands at them.

Suddenly they heard the female voice again from their back, the voice seemed to come from a distance. "Two Xiao Gongzi, please come with me!"

The boys jumped in fright. But when they turned around, their

eyes lit up. Turned out it was a young and pretty maid, who was sizing them up while hiding a smile on her face.

Since they have saved the two boys' life, it was only proper for them to obey their command.

Assuming the air of a refined gentleman, Kou Zhong bowed and said, "Jiejie, please lead the way!"

"Pfft!" the maid burst in laughter. She turned around gracefully and led them in.

The two boys scrambled over each other to walk behind her, to enjoy watching her beautiful back. They both felt that not only the Heaven did not bar their way, God treated them with exceptional generosity as well.

Stepping over the door, they saw a hallway stretching out in front of them, with three cabin doors on either side, but they did not see anybody, giving them the impression that the overall atmosphere was rather mysterious.

The pretty maid led them toward the last door on the left; beyond that they saw the stairs leading up and down to other levels of the deck.

The two boys were glancing to the left and right in curiosity

when the pretty maid pushed the cabin door open and spoke softly, “Two Gongzi, please come in.”

As soon as they stepped in, they were stunned. Because this room was actually very spacious, only there was a hanging bamboo curtain right in the middle, dividing the room into two sections. On the door side, there were lighted oil lamps on all four corners; there was also a bench and a small table for people to sit. Several scrolls of painting were hanging on the wall. Apparently the designer of this room put a lot of thought on the layout.

[2] Helmsman: this is another thing that I have difficulty translating. Some of you followed my ‘Deer and Cauldron’, in the end I decided to keep it as is.

Due to the light in this side of the bamboo wall was a lot brighter than the other side, unless they lifted up the bamboo curtain, they could never see the mystery that was on the other side. But if there were anybody on the other side looking this way, he or she would be able to see everything clearly, including the fine hair on their body.

The maid politely said, “Two Gongzi, please sit down.”

After the two sat down, the maid withdrew and closed the door behind her.

The two boys sat facing the bamboo wall; they smell faint fragrance coming from the other side of the bamboo curtain, a fragrance that was very captivating.

While Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were feeling lost, a very delicate woman's voice was heard from the other side of the bamboo curtain. "Two Xiao Gongzi, why did those dock ruffians chase you?"

Kou Zhong recognized the voice. "Turns out it was Madame!" he said respectfully, "Let us, two brothers, express our gratitude for saving our lives first."

Xu Ziling was afraid Kou Zhong might spout some nonsense, he interjected, "We had a fight with one of them, hence he called on those people to deal with us."

The Madame said dryly, "Two Xiao Gongzi speak in refined manner, moreover, you have strong skill, but you don't seem to know martial art; why is that?"

Kou Zhong giggled and said, "All our skill was taught by our Niang; how to read and recognize character, also she who took care of everything. After Niang passed away, we roam around everywhere, trying to see if there is any business we can do to make a fortune ..."

A tender snort came from behind the curtain, interrupting him, but clearly it was not Madame's voice.

The two boys were stunned; they have just realized that other than the Madame, there was another woman in there, whose status couldn't be lower than the Madame herself.

But why did she express displeasure at what Kou Zhong just said?

The Madame's voice was heard again, "And the other Xiao Gongzi, what is your intention?"

Xu Ziling knew she was asking him; shrugging his shoulder, he said, "Advance or retreat, we are together. He wants to make a fortune, naturally I also want to make a fortune."

The Madame sighed and said, "Other than money, what else do you want to accomplish?"

"Madame," Kou Zhong replied, "That is a very good question. After riches, naturally we want status. It would be best if we could be government official; that will certainly bring honor to our ancestors, spreading out our might to the eight directions."

From gentle, the tone of Madame's voice turned icy-cold as she calmly said, "There are so many people suffering from the chaos

of war and from the tyranny of the rulers out there; haven't you thought about striving for the common people, to bring light refreshments to the people under the heavens?"

Xu Ziling replied in consternation, "We are lowly and weak people, we can't even guarantee that we will eat three meals a day; we have never thought about that kind of things."

Remembering Li Jing, Kou Zhong said with a bitter smile, "That kind of great undertaking, only big hero can take it upon himself."

Madame said flatly, "Everybody has his own ambition. Gentlemen, please disembark now!"

Horried, the two boys cried out, "How could you do this?"

The door was pushed open, the maid walked in without any expression on her face. Her pretty face looked serious as she said bluntly, "Gentlemen, please!"

It was as if the two boys had seen two completely different people. Knowing that pleading would only bring them ridicule and cursing, the two boys had no choice but to puff out their chest and follow her back to the deck.

As they reached the hanging ladder, they saw the four warriors were still standing there with their hands on the hilt of their

swords, adopting an expelling-the-guest pose.

On the dock below, Ol' Liu and his gang of thugs were still waiting for their appearance, but they did not dare to make a ruckus. Evidently the warriors on the ship managed to strike fear in their heart.

It appears that this place was more lawless than Yangzhou.

Kou Zhong lightly pulled the corner of Xu Ziling's clothes and said in low voice, "Jump ship!"

Xu Ziling understood. Without saying anything, they ran at full speed toward the side of the ship farthest away from the dock, flew over the railings, and jumped into the ocean.

Seeing they disappeared into the sea, a hint of smile appeared on the corner of the maid's mouth, as if she already knew their response, but she did not stop them at all.

Book 2 Chapter 5 – Madame Dong Ming

‘Splash! Splash!’ One after another the two boys fell into the water.

The moment just before they entered the water, they saw three fast boats speeding toward them. There were several thugs on each boat, each one had a long punting pole equipped with sharp hook in his hand, they were shouting curses and swearing cuss words at the two boys as they came.

In the water, Kou Zhong knew that Xu Ziling’s water skill was not as good as his, so he desperately pulled him to dive toward the bottom of the big ship. Only by using the big ship as shield would they be able to evade the enemy’s punting poles. As for how to take a breath, at this time he still did not bother about it.

By the time the two boys reached the depth where the bottom of the ship was, the oxygen in their lungs had been depleted. They wanted to float up, but were hitting the keel. Being unprepared, they nearly died of suffocation; while they were at a loss, suddenly a stream of qi erupted. The two were pleased

beyond their imagination; together they swam toward the stern.

By the time this new qi was also depleted, another stream of qi was automatically generated from within their body. This time the two boys noticed that this strange qi was not dropped from the sky at all, but rather, it was generated by their body's true qi. It grew and multiplied unendingly that the two boys enjoyed its tremendous benefits. At this moment, they had already forgotten about how to deal with the enemy on the surface.

Xu Ziling felt strange heat appeared from the sole of his right foot, while cold stream steeped in from the sole of his left foot. The true qi surged and continuously circulated within his body, causing him to automatically channel his true qi according to the diagram in the 'Secret to Long Life'. At the same time his vision brightened considerably that he could see the dark shadow of the hulls above him, big and small, different from each other, as if it was a pattern.

Kou Zhong's experience was virtually the same; it's just that the true qi originated from the Tian Ling acupoint on the top of his head.

The two of them moved about slowly in the deep water, approximately four zhang below the sea surface. Each time they stretched out their limbs, the true qi in their body circulated one time in perfect harmony [orig. seamless heavenly clothes].

The true qi was self-generating perpetually, without giving them the feeling of suffocation.

After swimming for nobody knows how long, they crawled up onto the beach far away from the docks.

The sun was about to set, the two boys lying side-by-side on the sandy beach, laughing heartily.

Gasping for breath, Kou Zhong said, "I didn't know our internal strength is that formidable, without taking a breath we could swim that far, perhaps we could even swim to the other side of the ocean, without even have to pay for the ship fare."

Xu Ziling was enjoying the glow of the setting sun; stretching lazily, he said, "Right now I feel my body in full of energy. This is a good time to steal."

Kou Zhong sat up excitedly and looked around. He saw the dock in the distance, about four, five li away, hidden behind the towering sail masts, while where they were was a wild, mountainous country, with no man in sight for as far as they could see. He laughed and said, "Tonight we will swim back toward the dock behind the salt warehouse and think of a way to get in to steal some salt. And then we will transport it by boat. If anybody catches up with us, 'splash!' we will jump into the water, and play hide-and-seek with them underwater."

Zu Xiling also sat up, stretched out his arms and legs, and said, “If there are tigers right now, I feel like I can kill a few. That Madame is so strange; we were talking nicely, suddenly she drove us out. Humph! Does she think we are ugly? Why is it that other than Susu Jiejie, other women always think that our appearance is not pleasing to the eye?”

Kou Zhong wrapped his arm around his shoulder and said with a laugh, “The reason is very simple: because they are afraid they can’t help falling in love with us, to such an extent as they won’t be able to extricate themselves. Ha!”

By the time they finished laughing hard to console themselves for a while, the sun has not disappeared behind the western hills yet. But during that time the two boys’ clothes have dried out.

Upon looking at each other, they both realized that their hair was disheveled, their clothes in disarray, and they looked exactly like a couple of beggars. Suddenly both realized that they did not wish to go back to the water.

Kou Zhong quickly found an excuse, “Tomorrow we’ll figure out which water route to take before stealing the salt. Right now while the city gate is not closed yet, let’s return to the city to find a decent hotel and then have a good dinner, and then we can slowly think about our first big endeavor to make a fortune.”

Xu Ziling did not want to go back to the water any time soon either, he nodded in agreement.

The two boys walked back toward the city gate. They felt their body was lighter than usual, at least by half; their speed was also increasing, also by half. Their eyes and ears were a lot more keen than usual, they did not feel that the darkness was too much different than daytime.

Naturally they did not know that when they were underwater just now, they had accidentally entered the realm of endless qi circulation of Taoist internal energy cultivation, and had had an early glimpse of first-class qigong [system of deep breathing exercises] mystery.

Although the number of people practicing Taoism is too many to count, those that are able to achieve fine internal breathing state are actually not too many.

It was called 'external qi not exhausted, internal breathing not generated'.

If they were not in such a special situation like being underwater, without the guidance of a good master, the two boys might not be able to make such a breakthrough this period of difficulty even if they tried hard their entire life. But by lucky coincidence, they had taken the most important step in martial

art study. From uncultured stone into fine jade, far surpassing the limitation of their age.

The two boys took a cold bath in the hotel. When they got back to the street, they realized for the first time that nightlife in this town was more lively than that of Yangzhou. There was endless stream of horse and carriages, a sign of thriving city.

The women on the street were even more gorgeously dressed [orig. lovely scene of blossoming flowers swaying in the breeze], they did not appear to be afraid of men's gaze. The two boys feasted their eyes endlessly with unspeakable delight.

After having their stomach filled, the two boys' excitement grew, they went out to join the crowd.

Kou Zhong was craning his neck to look into the inside of one of the pleasure houses when Xu Ziling suddenly pulled him toward a nearby alley. He pointed to the street and said, "It's the Ol' Liu! Ah! Isn't that the Fu Duo Zhu of the Haisha Gang Tan Yong by his side?"

Stunned, Kou Zhong looked at the direction he indicated. Sure enough, he saw a group of men gathered inside a store across the street, each one carried a weapon, and two of the men were precisely Tan Yong and the Ol' Liu, who were standing next to each other, the former was giving instruction to the latter, while

Ol' Liu nodded his head continuously. The ones called Xie Feng and Chen Gui were standing behind these two.

Upon looking more clearly, they found out that the store was actually an external-injury clinic; it appeared that this place must be one of their hideouts.

“What are they talking about?” Xu Ziling wondered aloud.

The two boys could not resist straining their ears trying to listen. Suddenly Tan Yong's voice ringing faintly in their ears, “Boss [orig. long tou, dragon head] will arrive on the third watch [midnight, between 11pm-1am] tonight. Strange thing is, why couldn't we find the bodies of those two little demons?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling jumped in shock; they did not expect to really be able to hear Tan Yong. The two sides were separated by more than three zhang distance, plus the street was clamoring with all kinds of noises jumbled together; yet they were clearly able to hear Tan Yong's voice.

The two boys were very excited. But when they wanted to listen further, they could not hear anything.

Kou Zhong happily said, “It seems that our skill is improving tremendously. But I wonder: Ol' Liu and Tan Yong have been in collusion from the start to frame us. Apparently Ol' Liu pretended

to be the bad guy, and then Tan Yong posed as the good guy who helps us out of trouble. But later on Tan Yong incited Ol' Liu to kill us."

Xu Ziling's thought process was more meticulous. "At that time they still did not know what we are Wulin's martial art masters who are able to hit Ol' Liu until he could not crawl back up; so why did they pay particular attention to us?" he wondered.

Even with Kou Zhong's quick-thinking, he was still at a loss. "It doesn't matter what they are going to do, the point is that they want to harm us," he said in a low voice, "Jianghu people live by the rule, 'enmity must be avenged'. Tan Yong might be difficult to deal with, but Ol' Liu is very easy to beat. We simply need to stalk him, as soon as we find he is alone, we can strike both to teach him a lesson and to rob his mother's purse; as well as to help us buy a couple of sharp sabers. Henceforth we need not be afraid to meet and fight those guys."

Not only Xu Ziling was not afraid, he found it very amusing instead.

While he was about to reply, Ol' Liu came out of the shop, followed by two men. They were heading to the left.

The two boys' eyes fell on the broadsword hanging on the two men's waists. The temptation of obtaining these sabers far

surpassed their guts in dealing with the three men. Clenching their teeth, they decided to follow these three men.

Ol' Liu, three men, strutted down the street; passers-by simply avoided them by walking on the other side; clearly they were the 'people-see, people-afraid' type of characters. When they came across five or six government officers, they even stopped and stood in the middle of the street, whispering to each other for a while, before they finally turned into a dark, secluded alley perpendicular to the main street.

The two boys exchanged a 'come-on, be brave' look at each other, and then they pursued on.

Upon entering the alley, they found out that the three people have vanished.

Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling toward a wooden door of someone's rear courtyard; he whispered, "They must have come into this backyard, otherwise, how could they disappear just like that? Shall we come in to have a look?"

Xu Ziling was aghast, "What if there are other Haisha Bang people inside?" he asked.

Kou Zhong sighed. "Just consider Ol' Liu is lucky tonight!"

Xu Ziling said, “If we go back to the hotel, we are only going to sleep anyway; how about waiting here for a moment?”

Kou Zhong sat down on the ground at the corner of the alley; he laughed and said, “I feel like we are back in Yangzhou, when we were bored, we simply sat down and chatted for half a day. Ha! We finally enter the Jianghu and roam the world.”

Xu Ziling sat down next to him and said in a low voice, “Haisha Bang seems to have a lot of power around here; even the porters at the dock have to obey their orders. Isn’t sea sand [hai sha] referring to sea salt [hai yan]? To be able to gain control over salt trading in here, they must be very powerful and extremely rich; what could they possibly want from a couple of poor kids like us?”

Kou Zhong had a new level of respect for him; he said, “I haven’t thought about it as thoroughly as you did; fortunately we have decided to steal the salt, otherwise, I am afraid we can’t afford to buy even a grain of salt.”

And then he continued excitedly, “The most important thing right now is getting rich. If we have money, we can go looking for Susu Jiejie; if she has not married Li Dage yet, she can marry us. Jiejie is pretty, and she is kind-hearted too; to have her as our wife, we would be very happy indeed.”

Xu Ziling laughed and scolded him, “Chatting and laughing cannot be too much; how can Jiejie marry two persons at the same time? Are you saying we should sleep together in one bed at night? I don’t want it.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “The most important thing in life is to find comfort for oneself. We have not even touched women’s breasts yet, how can there be men as useless as we are? Hee! If we can seize those two sidekicks of Ol’ Liu, why can’t we go to the pleasure house and be merry?”

Xu Ziling snapped, “And at that time, if we do not immediately leave the city, Haisha Bang will chop us to pieces; how can we be merry then?”

Kou Zhong was jolted, “Someone’s coming!”

Xu Ziling pricked up his ear and listened carefully; sure enough, he heard footsteps behind the wooden door. The two boys sprang up and stood on either side of the wooden door, while their hearts were pounding wildly.

Ol’ Liu’s voice was heard from behind the door, “Xiao Hua really knows how to make men lose their soul and rock their spirit; no wonder although Er Ye [second master] is so busy that he is spouting smoke through his seven orifices, he still have us deliver the swallow’s nest to coax her.”

The other man said, “I was also itching all over to see her; if not for Dong Ming Pai [eastern sea sect] people came, I would immediately go to a low-grade brothel and have a woman taming the fire in me.”

Ol’ Liu laughed lecherously, “I heard Madame Dong Ming, Shan Mei [sole beauty] Xianren [immortal/celestial being/fairy or goddess] is just like her name, she is as beautiful as an immortal [usually female]. I hope her skill in bed is not inferior to her martial art skill.”

The other man, who had not spoken so far, suddenly said, “I don’t care how good her skill in bed is, would she even give us the time of the day? After the Boss, there is Second Boss; everybody’s lining up, I doubt that you, Ol’ Liu, will get your turn.”

Three men laughed lewdly.

‘Squeak!’ The wooden door was pushed open. Totally unsuspecting, Ol’ Liu walked out.

‘Bang! Bang!’ The two men behind him received a couple of punches from behind the door; with a miserable ‘Oomph’ they fell backward.

As Ol’ Liu turned around in surprise, the pit of his stomach also

received a couple of punches, sending him rolling around on the ground in terrible pain.

The two boys did not expect it would be this easy to deal with these three men.

Kou Zhong stretched out his neck to look inside, but all he could see was a quiet little garden with no one in sight. Not far from the garden, there was a small two-story building; the door was closed, but there was lantern light penetrating through the cracks. Signaling Xu Ziling, together they dragged the three men inside.

Other than Ol' Liu, the other two men were unconscious, with blood all over their faces. Skillfully the two boys loosened up the three men's belt and tied them securely.

After taking away their broadswords and purses, they grabbed Ol' Liu. "Do you remember us?" Kou Zhong asked with a laugh.

Ol' Liu was still so much in pain that his face was twisted, his muscle trembled. "Daye [big master] please spare my life!" he groaned.

Kou Zhong pulled out a broadsword and pressed it across his neck; with an ugly face he shot a string of foul language, and then he asked, "I will ask you a question, and you will honestly give me

an answer; or else I'll cut your throat. But it will be a little cut, just enough to bleed you to death."

By this time Ol' Liu already had a good view of them; he was aghast. "Didn't you drown?" he asked.

'Pow!' Xu Ziling rewarded him with a slap on the face, instilling fear on him.

"You are allowed only to reply, not to ask question," he said, "Haisha Bang's salt warehouse, where are they? Don't beat around the bush. I'll interrogate your brothers later, and then I'll know if you told me a lie."

Kou Zhong praised him inwardly; this was the technique Du Fuwei used against them. Busily he increased the pressure of the saber against Ol' Liu's neck and hissed, "Answer quickly!"

Ol' Liu could only mumbled 'uh, uh, ah, ah', but no words came out of his mouth.

Xu Ziling said irritably, "You saber presses onto his throat, how is he going to speak?"

Sheepishly Kou Zhong pulled his saber back a little.

Betting on their young age, Ol' Liu tried to be brave, "If you kill

me, I guarantee you won't leave this place alive," he said.

Xu Ziling laughed and said, "Aren't you going to deal with Dong Ming Pai tonight? How can your gang people have time to pay us any attention right now? By the time they discover your three dead bodies, we will already be far away from here."

Kou Zhong exposed his bragging, "Don't blow your own horn; didn't we offend you today? Why are we still alive and well? Alright! Let me cut one of your fingers first, I want to see if you, this tough guy, are going to cry or not."

"No!" Xu Ziling shook his head, "Blinding his eye will be more fun. Question is: which eye? Left? Or right?"

Immediately from a tough guy Ol' Liu turned into wimpy guy. "Xiaoren [little/lowly one] admits defeat," he begged for mercy, "We have eight salt warehouses in total, which one Shaoye[1] wants to know?"

"Tell us about all eight of them in one stretch," Kou Zhong replied, "If you hesitate one bit, you lose one eye. I am a skilled person in gouging someone's eye."

Terrified, Ol' Liu talked in one breath. Kou Zhong had him repeating it several times until he was satisfied that Ol' Liu did not lie; "Which warehouse is the closest one?" he then asked.

Helpless, Ol' Liu told him everything.

Xu Ziling said, "What kind of sect is Dong Ming Pai, actually? Why did your Boss have to be here for them?"

Ol' Liu hastily said, "If I tell you, would two Shaoye let me go?"

Kou Zhong said, "If you are honest, we'll let you sleep in here for one night. But I'll have to cut your two friends' head to show the way we, the two dragons of Yangzhou, work."

Of course he would not actually kill anybody; it was just the technique frequently employed by the people of the 'dark road' to let people know that they were not easy to deal with.

As expected, Ol' Liu was so scared that his face turned blue and his lips purple. "Shaoye please spare my life," he begged, "I'll talk. But you must keep your promise, don't hurt me."

"Quickly talk!" Xu Ziling barked.

Ol' Liu dejectedly said, "I only know what I heard from Er Ye. Dong Ming Pai came from an island on the other side of the ocean called Liuqiu [Ryukyu]. The Sect is predominantly female. Hey! The ship you escaped to today was precisely their ship; did you see them?" [Translator's note: 'they' and 'them' here are

feminine.]

Kou Zhong cursed, “Are you asking me, or am I asking you? Besides, we did not escape aboard, we boarded the ship. Do you think having ten fingers is too much and you think caressing women with nine fingers would be more satisfying?”

Immediately Ol’ Liu pleaded for mercy again. He then continued, “Every year around Chunfen time [Spring Equinox, 4th of the 24 solar terms, March 21 – April 4] they come to coastal regions to select young men to be brought back to Ryukyu. I don’t know why Boss wants to deal with them this year. Oh! I really don’t know the details of this matter.”

The two boys suddenly saw the light; they understood now the reason Tan Yong was interested in them, and they felt very proud of themselves. But then they recalled that in the end Madame Ryukyu Shan Mei Xianren did not select them, so they felt inferior mixed with self-pity.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged a glance, they both lost interest in continuing the interrogation; so they tore the three men’s clothes to stuff their big mouths, and then using ‘their school’s unique skill’ they made the men bend over and tied them tightly with special rope braided from the men’s clothes so that it would not be easy for them to exert their strength. Only then did they leave unhurriedly.

Concerning the matter between Haisha Bang and Dong Ming Pai, they had neither the interest nor the power to interfere.

The only thing in their mind right now was how to stealthily loot Haisha Bang's salt and make a fortune out of it. When that time comes, wouldn't they be able to soar over the wide ocean and the empty sky?

[1] Continuing my note on Shaoye earlier, here he put himself in subordinate/servant position.

Book 2 Chapter 6 – Benefiting Self, Benefiting Others

When they got to the city gate, they found out that not only the city gate has closed, there was also a large assembly of people. For some unknown reason, the yamen [government office in feudal China] officers who guard the gate were also replaced by big men.

Being new thieves, the two boys still lacked confidence; they retreated to a dark alley not far from the city gate and sat down on the ground.

Kou Zhong took out the purse he snatched from his victims earlier. Under the dim golden and orange light shining from the torches at the city gate, he counted his booty.

Xu Ziling took out the saber and lovingly played with it in his hand.

After counting it twice, Kou Zhong exclaimed in delight, “This

time we hit the jackpot; there are altogether about twenty taels of silver. Not only it is enough to cover our travel expenses to Luoyang, we can also have a feast, and stroll into a low-grade brothel for three days.”

With the saber rested on his knees, Xu Ziling stretched out his neck in disbelief, and then happily said, “In that case, we need not steal salt, transport salt and sell salt; such a hard work.”

“So lack of ambition,” Kou Zhong scolded, “Twenty taels is just to satisfy the most annoying needs, we will still steal Haisha’s salt as planned. We stay here one night, when the city gate opens tomorrow, we immediately pick up the goods and leave. Ay! I hope nobody will find Ol’ Liu.”

Xu Ziling said in dismay, “I wish we know qinggong [lightness skill], so we could climb over the wall and leave. Ah!”

The two boys’ countenance changed greatly. They heard hoof beats in the distance coming rapidly over. As their scalp went numb, a large group of riders galloped along the main street outside the alley; there were at least a hundred riders, and all were speeding toward the city gate.

Soon they heard someone yelled in subdued voice, “Sea sand [haisha] raises its power!”

The other side replied, “Eastern sea [dong ming] in trouble!”

When the two boys stretched out their neck to look, they saw the small door by the city gate was opened, the crowd of Haisha Bang riders urged their horses to file out of the city.

The two boys looked at each other. But soon afterwards several more people went out of the city; all with the same secret password. Some of the gang members even went out on foot.

Xu Ziling said, “Seems to me Haisha Bang is going to attack Dong Ming Pai’s big ship tonight. Should we notify them? Haisha Bang definitely does not have even half a decent person!”

Kou Zhong’s eyes lit up as he said in low voice, “Do you want to go to Ryukyu? Just by marrying that little maid, our luck cannot be considered shallow. Come!”

Xu Ziling followed him standing up. With terrified expression he said, “What if they recognize us?”

Puffing up his chest, Kou Zhong replied, “Without going into the tiger den, how can we get a tiger cub? Oh! I get it. It’s the tiger’s daughter, and the tiger is female. For the sake of those beautiful Dong Ming Pai’s beautiful tigresses, we have to fight his mother’s battle. Look! The city gate is still open, we have sabers; if we get recognized, we’ll kill our way out. As long as we could reach the

seaside, ‘splash!’ we can plunge into the water. With our Nine Mysteries breath-holding Great Method, who could possibly catch us? Come on! Coward!”

Finished speaking he strode forward.

Xu Ziling had no choice but to follow him out.

They had just stepped into the main street, there was the sound of hoof beats again. Four riders came over, fast.

Kou Zhong cast his gaze toward the city gate, but did not see the big men earlier; there were only about a dozen yamen officers, who were staring hard at them. He could not go back even if he wanted to. Turning around to face the four riders he called out, “Has Er Ye left of the city?”

The four riders brushed past; one of them replied, “Da Ye [big/first master] and Er Ye are in the back!” Then they went like a whirlwind.

Terrified, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling hastily increased their speed. Still far away from the yamen officers, they called out, “Sea sand raises its power!”

One of the officers, presumably the leader, laughed and said, “You, two kids whose smell of your mother’s milk has not yet

dried, also want to follow those men doing their work; don't you like to have a long life?"

The officers burst into laughter.

One of the troops said, "Who are you? How come I've never seen you before?"

Kou Zhong patted his saber; assuming a forthright manner he said, "Er Ye is our elder [orig. agong – grandfather], Xie Feng is our adoptive senior [orig. adie – dad/old man]. It was only last month that they included us in."

Seeing he spoke reasonably and with confidence, the troops did not stop them; they let the two boys got out of the city.

The two boys were wild with delight; they rushed out of the city.

But as soon as they stepped out of the city gate, both groaned inwardly. Because the area just outside the gate was densely packed with a large group of men and horses, at least the number was close to a thousand. However, because no one lighted a torch and that everybody was silent, the two boys did not find out until they were outside the gate; therefore, they were now stuck.

Someone shouted, “Sea sand raises its power!”

The two boys responded in unison, “Eastern sea in trouble!”

A man came over to meet them, “Which hall?” he asked in low voice.

Bracing himself, Kou Zhong replied, “Yuhang division!”

The man did not suspect anything; he pointed to a group of men and said, “Tie the red band and stand over there. Boss will be here soon!”

Seeing him handing out two pieces of red band, Xu Ziling hastily stepped forward to receive it.

When they got to the Yuhang division group, the two boys pretended to be busy tying the red band, and then with head hung low they stood at the last of the line; surprisingly, nobody said anything.

Several men at the front turned their heads around to look at them, but since it was dark, they could not see clearly. The men were just about to question the two boys when sound of hoof beats was heard; a group of riders went out the city gate. Hence nobody paid them any attention anymore.

When they looked up, they saw a big man like an iron tower. Because the two men standing on his left and right were holding their torch high, everybody was able to see him clearly.

This man looked intimidatingly impressive; on his back he carried a pair of hatchets, his eyes were like copper bells. When he swept his gaze around, everybody, including Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, felt that he was looking straight at him.

The other people with him were different from each other. One of them was a rather good-looking Buddhist nun; her oversized Buddhist robe was blown by the sea breeze that it stuck to her body, revealing her beautiful and captivating curves.

That Tan Yong was also one of them, it's just that he was at the last of the line; apparently the other people ranked higher than him.

The troops opened up a path in the middle. The big man urged his horse to gallop in a small circle before he finally stopped. One after another the Haisha Bang people pulled their weapons and paid their respect.

While raising his saber, Kou Zhong took the opportunity to whisper in Xu Ziling's ear, "Looks like this Boss is much more superior than us, two martial art masters. As soon as we have the opportunity, we must slip away; don't care about anything else."

Seeing this kind of display of power, Xu Ziling was also extremely nervous; he nodded incessantly.

The Haisha Bang Boss reined his horse and shouted, “This time, we, Haisha Bang are working for Yuwen Huaji Daren; generous reward is not difficult to attain, plus there are other benefits as well. The key to victory this time is to attack when they are not prepared, leaving no one alive. You must make an all-out effort to follow your Boss in handling this matter; anyone who shrinks back on approaching the battlefield will be dealt with according to our house rules. When we achieve success, everybody will be heavily rewarded. Got it?”

The crowd responded in unison.

This place was still quite far from the dock, separated by a gulf. Even if they shouted loudly, Dong Ming Pai people on the dock would not hear it.

Kou Zhong was just about to pull Xu Ziling to slip away from the back when he suddenly realized that there were people shouting their response from a small hill behind them as well; therefore, he abandoned his plan.

In the meantime, Tan Yong and a short man rode toward the Yuhang division people; he talked in a low voice for a moment,

and then he gave the order to move. Those with horses galloped on horseback, those on foot ran behind them. The annoying thing was that Tan Yong fell behind, he rode at the rear of the formation, so that the two boys were unable to go AWOL. Without any choice they ran in the middle of the group.

After traveling for little less than half a sichen, they arrived at the seaside, where three double-mast boats were already waiting. They were about three, four li away from the shore where the big Dong Ming Pai ship was anchored.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling braced themselves to climb onboard one of the ships under Tan Yong's supervision. As soon as they were on board, everybody started working. Some were preparing the stone catapult; some took care of the fire arrows, and some others manned the sail and untie the mooring rope. Only the two boys did not know what to do, so that they were sticking up like a sore thumb.

While they were terrified and extremely nervous, Tan Yong suddenly decided to board their ship. Fortunately the ship was in total blackout; otherwise, they would be discovered early on as fake articles.

The two were at a loss; they were just thinking of leaning against the ship's railing and jumping into the sea when a man stopped them and shouted, "Why haven't you go down to the

bilge and get me the 'water armor' and 'breaking-hill bore'?"

The two boys jumped in fright; they went down to the bilge with heads hung down.

More than a dozen men were already busy carrying some wooden chests up. One of the men said, "Only one chest left, you two can take care of it."

Their mind went blank, the two boys groped their way down the bilge. They saw under the dusky light of a wind lantern, piles of junks, but there was no one else; and then they saw the chest.

Kou Zhong was overjoyed; he pounced onto the chest and opened up its lid. Inside there was a huge, sharp helix auger, weighed at least fifty, sixty catties.

The ship shuddered slightly; apparently it cast off and set sail.

Xu Ziling helped him taking the auger out of the chest; without prior discussion they put the sharp tip against the bottom of the hold and turned the handle.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "If we can sink this ship, all our enmities are avenged in full."

"This matter is related to Yuwen Huaji," Xu Ziling said, "We

cannot just sit and watch and remain indifferent. After the water enters the ship, we will run to the deck and making a ruckus, to spoil Haisha Bang's plan on 'attacking the unprepared enemy'. And then we jump into the sea flee for our lives, and immediately steal some salt. Ha!"

The more they talked, the more excited they got; they turned the handle faster and faster like a windmill. Less than half a day later, 'pop!' a hole appeared on the bottom of the ship; hastily they pulled the auger out.

By the time they were ready to take the chest to the deck, the seawater had already reached their ankles.

Like a crouching monster the giant Dong Ming Pai ship sat still by the dock, the area surrounding it was dark without any lantern at all, only its bow and its stern had four small wind lanterns shining their cheerless, lonely and cold lights, which flickered incessantly in the sea breeze.

There were hundreds or even thousands of other ships and boats around the harbor; some were moored close to the shore, but most dropped their anchor in the bay.

The three Haisha Bang ships sailed quietly through this array of boats, until they were about ten zhang away from the giant ship before stopping.

The boat that had its bottom drilled has been sinking for about two chi, only about a chi or so more, and the water will reach the deck. But because everybody's attention was on the enemy's ship, no one took any notice yet.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were hiding in the darkest area near the bow; they each had a bow and an arrow, which tip was wrapped in a piece of cloth that had been soaked in oil. Their hearts were pounding wildly in anticipation.

Tan Yong gave his command, "To the water!"

Silently eight of his men, wearing wetsuit and carrying the 'breaking-hill' auger dived into the water.

Suddenly someone let out a muffled shout, "Why is the water level so high?"

Kou Zhong knew it was time. Nudging Xu Ziling, he lighted the arrow, and then, in everybody's amazement they shot the fiery arrows toward the big ship, drawing two beautiful fiery arcs in the dark sky.

"Are you crazy?" Tan Yong roared in shock.

The two boys shouted together, "Sea sand raises its power,

eastern sea in trouble! Haisha Bang attacks the unprepared!”

Tan Yong stormed across the boat. “You, two little demons again!” he thundered.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling threw their bows by swinging their arms like throwing secret projectiles toward Tan Yong. And then they turned around and jumped into the water together.

On the other side, closer to the dock, the battle cry shook the heavens. The big ship slowly left the shore heading north to escape. It passed behind Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, who had just climbed out of the water right behind Haisha Bang’s warehouse by the dock.

The two boys laughed and ran toward the warehouse.

When they reached the entrance, Kou Zhong grabbed the iron lock with one hand and exclaimed, “Look at my internal strength!”

“Umph!” the padlock did not budge.

Kou Zhong was at a loss.

Grabbing the iron chain, he yelled, “Get your saber and chop this thing!”

Xu Ziling shook his head, “What if it breaks my saber?”

Kou Zhong angrily said, “You break your saber, you can buy a new one. But if we cannot make a fortune, we will be paupers for the rest of our lives. It’s not every day that Haisha Bang would deploy their entire troops to fight a battle like this!”

Xu Ziling giggled happily and pulled Kou Zhong’s saber. Exerting his entire strength he chopped down.

‘Tchak!’ The iron chain met the saber and broke instantly.

The two boys were taken aback. But they were too busy to think too much.

Pointing to the biggest sailboat moored on the dock behind them, Kou Zhong said, “Quickly row that boat here, I’ll get the goods.”

They have lived for more or less eighteen and seventeen years, respectively, but have never seen a better scenery than they saw right now.

Kou Zhong was lying on the sacks of salt piling high on the boat, enjoying the early morning sunshine, while humming Yangzhou’s most popular folk song. He was so comfortable that he looked like

he was about to die of laziness.

Xu Ziling was looking at the road stretching along the river on the left bank, his eyes darted quickly to the water level that was very close to the deck. “I told you not to steal this much salt,” he said with a frown, “Now even the place to sleep is crammed with goods, and the boat will sink very soon. We’d better cast off a dozen sacks or so!”

Kou Zhong jumped in fright; he turned around to hug the salt sack tightly and cried out, “These are shining white silver; if you want me to throw away money into the sea, you might as well tell me to throw my life away into the sea.”

Seeing Xu Ziling stayed silent, he sat down again and giggled, “Xiao Ling, please don’t get angry. Alright, how about this: when we come ashore to buy clothes and provision later, let me see if there are people willing to offer good price for several sacks!”

“This is coastal salt-producing area,” Xu Ziling angrily said, “You want to sell salt here, those who are willing to offer good price must be either a lunatic or an idiot just like you. The difference is one spends money recklessly, the other considers wealth as important as his life.”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and came over to the stern. He wrapped his arm around Xu Ziling’s shoulder and said, “One

world, two brothers; there's no need to be mad. Ha! I am a bit greedy, but it's all for our future. If we could earn a few coins, we will be a bit more comfortable and happy in the future. Perhaps we can even organize a militia, strike the capital and be a happy emperor. At that time, won't we be able to push Yuwen Huagu out of Meridian Gate and behead him to avenge Niang?"

With a forced laugh he added, "Look! This boat is so sturdy, we are making good progress with tail wind and following the current."

Xu Ziling fetched his saber and shrugged his 'embrace'; he stood up and stepped over nobody knew how many sacks of salt, toward the middle of the boat under the sail mast, where he stopped with his saber in hand. "Do you, Zhong Shao, know how to operate the sail?" he said with a wry smile, "Right now the sky is clear the weather is fair, the breeze is still the waves are quiet; naturally we won't have any problem. But if we come across the wind and waves, in a moment or two when we are sinking down, don't you 'fight over the heavens and cry over the earth' to me."

Kou Zhong stroked his own big head and pointed to the shore to their left; he laughed and said, "This head of mine, which you think does not have any plan inside, has already thought about all those problems. When the sky turns somewhat ominous, we immediately sail toward the shore. Ha! I thought you are worried about some serious things, turns out merely this trivial matter."

Xu Ziling pointed his saber to Kou Zhong and said coldly, “If this boat suddenly pull toward the shore, if we do not crash and have our body torn and our bones crushed, I won’t open my mouth again, ever; and then you can laugh at me that I am worried in vain.”

Apparently Kou Zhong has exhausted his argument, “How many sacks do you want to throw away?” he asked painfully.

Xu Ziling dejectedly kneeled down on the sacks of salt; he sighed and said, “That’s not our biggest problem, but if we travel along this route, sooner or later we will enter inland via the Great River, thus Yangzhou is the only route we must follow. At that time you should know who we are going to encounter.”

Kou Zhong acted as if he had just seen the light; laughing aloud he said, “How could my outstanding brains not think about that matter? When we get there, we crash our way through Yangzhou in the night. Not only we will avoid the government boats, we also conveniently avoid coming across our old Die. When we arrive at Liyang, we will disembark a bit early to sell half of our goods, and transport the rest by mule cart to his mother’s far away places, hence completed our great scheme to make a fortune. Look! This plan is so perfect.”

Xu Ziling knew he could not argue with him, he stood up and started practicing his saber play.

Kou Zhong watched with rapt attention for a moment. Finally he drew his saber and said, “Looking at you waving your hand and kicking your leg alone like a madman, let me, Zhong Shao accompany you playing for a couple of stances!”

Xu Ziling flatly said, “I am afraid my hand will slip and injure you.”

“You? Injure me?” Kou Zhong screamed, “En garde!”

The saber in his hand emitted a sharp cold wind that even he himself could not believe as it swept across toward Xu Ziling.

Xu Ziling had never expected that he would be this formidable. Unleashing the stance ‘Unyielding and Escaping’ of the ‘Bloody Battle Ten Styles’ taught by Li Jing, he swiftly moved sideways before hacking down his saber once again.

The two boys were so worked up that soon they even forgot the styles and simply moved their sabers any way they pleased.

They also forgot to look at the sun, which was covered by dark clouds, and the sea breeze, which was getting stronger; they thought it was the wind generated by their sabers.

Finally what Xu Ziling was worried about has arrived.

Book 2 Chapter 7 – Fish In The Net

‘Splosh!’

Scowling miserably, Kou Zhong helped Xu Ziling tossing the twentieth sack of salt into the ocean. Only then did the seawater no longer attack the deck. Fortunately it was just a small storm; otherwise the boat would have been capsized.

Completely exhausted, the two boys sat on sacks of salt; they did not even have any strength left to laugh or to cry.

By the time the sun showed itself again, Kou Zhong suddenly burst out laughing like crazy. Naturally Xu Ziling also laughed with him until tears flowing out of his eyes.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “We have lost at least enough money to stroll into low-grade brothel twenty times; Laotianye [God/Heaven] is really cruel.”

Xu Ziling sneered, “Didn’t Bai Lao Fuzi often say we should feel contented with our fate? My Zhong Shaoye, one drink, one peck

[the context is animal], everything is pre-destined. The Heaven has decided that we lost these twenty sacks of salt, chances are most of sacks won't be left for us either."

Kou Zhong'e entire body, from head to toe, suddenly shook violently; pointing behind them, he groaned, "You are right, looks like the Heaven really destined us to be poor wretches; even the remaining fifty, sixty sacks will be taken away."

Xu Ziling looked back in shock; he saw five three-mast big ships have just turned from the sea into the river. Not only that, the enemy's pursuing technique was clearly extraordinarily brilliant, because the two boys did not even realize their presence until they were only two li away from them. Judging by the pursuers' speed, at most it would only take the time needed to burn an incense stick before they could catch up with them.

The two boys looked up at their boat's flag first, it was embroidered with the fish pattern of the Haisha Bang flag. When they looked at the five pursuing ships, they groaned together, because they saw similar pattern on the mast of all of them.

Kou Zhong threw himself down on the sacks of salt and wailed, "Finished! All my sea sands are finished!" [reminder: haisha means sea sand.]

Xu Ziling pulled him up and called out, "Let's go! Before it's too

late.”

Suddenly there was a tender laughter, and then they saw a small fast boat coming over; the one sitting on the bow was precisely the Buddhist nun they saw the other night. There were ten men rowing the boat, ten well-trained men, so that the boat glided on the ocean surface like an arrow.

The pretty nun called out, “You just think about escaping right now, it’s really too late!”

The two boys noticed that she was wearing wetsuit, and it looks like she was ready to jump into the water to catch them. Their soul flew away and scattered, how could they still care about the sacks of salt? Immediately they turned around and jumped into the sea; they did not even have time to admire her clearly visible curves under the skin-tight suit, the body that could make the men who look at her pop their eyes and choke their throats.

The pretty nun laughed until her beautiful body shook uncontrollably. Gasping for breath, she said, “If I, the Mermaid You Qiufeng, ever let you, these two kids ever escape the net, I will never go down into the water again.”

Only after saying that did she jump into the water in an incomparably graceful posture. Compared to Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling’s awkward jumped earlier, the difference was like night and

day.

Under water, the sun rays looked like tens of thousands strands of silver thread, turning the clear, deep-blue seabed world into an array of infinite stereoscopic mirrors.

The nun, You Qiufeng, focused her eyes and immediately saw Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling about a hundred zhang ahead, desperately trying to swim toward the shore. The bottom of the sailboat looked like a strange clump of black cloud hovering overhead in the clear and brilliant ocean surface.

You Qiufeng twisted her waist, and like a wisp of smoke she darted forward with speed at least more than 50% faster than the ones she was pursuing.

Within Haisha Bang, whose domain was the sea, there was not a second person whose water skill was even close to hers; from this, it was clear how formidable she really was.

She did not understand at all how the two little demons were able to hold their breath underwater. Without first-class internal energy, it was simply impossible to do.

But this moment she was simply too busy to think. Their Bangzhu [clan/gang leader], the Dragon King Han Gaitian, had already issued a strict order to spare no expense in capturing

them alive.

By this time Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling have already seen the pretty nun pursuing them from behind, but they had no way of escaping.

At first Kou Zhong was about two zhang ahead of Xu Ziling, but seeing the enemy rapidly approaching, he knew that very soon she would catch up with Xu Ziling, whose water skill was not as good as his. Therefore, clenching his teeth, he waved his hand to have Xu Ziling swim ahead, and then, with the saber in his hand, he turned around to face the enemy.

However, how could Xu Ziling be willing to let Kou Zhong face the enemy alone? Hence he also held his saber across as he turned around to fight the fast-approaching enemy.

Two sides rapidly approaching each other. Soon they would be engaged in close combat. Suddenly a quirly smile appeared on You Qiufeng's face as she reached toward her back. Waving her hand, a large net shot out like an arrow to meet the two boys head-on.

The boys saw the large net like a layer of black cloud coming fast at them. By the time they realized the situation was bad, they have already been captured inside the net; persons and sabers became the fish in the net.

The boat they stole along with the salt suffered the same fate; it has become Haisha Bang's prisoner. It was towed behind Haisha Bang's flagship using a very thick rope, with its sail folded down.

Haisha Bang's big boss, the Dragon King Han Gaitian pompously sat on a special dragon chair. Behind his chair stood seven of his subordinates with law-protector level, who have been fighting from all four quarters with him. Their position was even higher than the eighteen helmsmen who were in charge of the eighteen coastal salt-producing divisions.

His dragon chair was set up leaning against the door of the cabin at the stern. He was waiting calmly for the two young offenders to be brought over.

Haisha Bang was one of three major gangs along the southeast coast; it share the same fame as the Shuiling Bang [water dragon gang] and Jukun Bang [gigantic leviathan gang].

The three major gangs were suspicious and envious of each other. Previously they were still able to delimit their respective territory and sphere of influence, hence they were able to maintain peace in general.

But since Sui Dynasty government became corrupt, the heroes all over the world [tian xia] arose, the three major gangs also

began to stir, each conspired to expand their influence, and thus the power struggle gradually turned intense.

Shuiling Bang has always attached themselves to the powerful Song Clan of the south. But for their survival, Haisha Bang cast their lot to the Yuwen Clan and became one powerful claw and teeth of the Yuwen family.

Jukun Bang on the other hand, stayed independent. Nevertheless, in terms of fame and power they were not the least bit inferior. The hottest topic in Jianghu recently was after the former Clan Leader Yun Guangling was murdered and his daughter Yun Yuzhen took office, Jukun Bang's prestige has become even more dazzling.

This beautiful woman with the nickname 'Clan Leader of the Fairer Sex' [orig. hong fen bang zhu – clan leader of rouge and powder] had a consummate martial art skill, even more outstanding than her father; she was considered as number one heroine of the southeastern Wulin world.

Meanwhile, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, with their hands tied behind their back, were dragged toward Han Gaitian, and were pushed down to kneel by the four strong men who were in charge of them; the two boys hung their head dispiritedly.

The subordinate reported, "Both they and their boat have been

searched, only twenty taels of silver found, there is no other things.”

Han Gaitian’s eyes shot a cold ray. “Report your name!” he barked.

Kou Zhong called out, “I am Fu Zhong, he is Fu Ling ...”

‘Pow! Pow!’ Two long whips lashed out from behind, breaking the back of two boys’ clothes, and tore into their flesh; their face’s muscles twisted in severe pain.

Han Gaitian laughed aloud and said, “Still dare to lie to me? You are Kou Zhong, and the other Xu Ziling; both are criminals whose capture Yuwen Zongguan put in the wanted notice nationwide. Whoever can bring you back to Yangzhou and hand you over to Yuchi Zongguan will receive a thousand taels of gold as a reward.”

Standing on his right was the chief law protector, the ‘Fat Assassin’. This man was so fat that he looked like a ball, his eyes small and treacherous. Hearing the last sentence, he laughed eerily and said, “Human beings will die for riches just as birds will for food; if not for these two kids were greedy, stealing a boat load of sea sand, it would not be easy for us to get these thousand taels of gold.”

Feeling the pain on his back, Kou Zhong was apologetic toward

Xu Ziling and could only look at him with bitter smile. The latter however, acted if nothing had happened; he said in low voice, "Turns out we are worth that much. If we had sold ourselves, wouldn't we be very rich by now?"

"Silence!" Han Gaitian roared.

While the two boys were frightened that they were trembling inside, the pretty nun You Qiufeng's tender laughter was heard, coming from inside the cabin. She had changed into a dry robe; surprisingly she also wore a wig with the hair rolled up in a bun, which was held together carelessly with seven or eight silver hairpins; she looked quite odd.

With hundred charms and thousand daintiness she came over to Han Gaitian, and then plopped her buttocks on his thigh, and wrapped her arms around Han Gaitian's neck, which was as thick and solid as a tree trunk. With a flatteringly sweet voice she said, "To lose at sunrise but gain at sunset; although this time Dong Ming Pai escaped great catastrophe, in the end we obtain these two valuable kids. Now Bangzhu [Clan Leader] have enough face to see Yuwen Daren."

Han Gaitian reached out to caress the pretty nun's bottom; he patted it twice and then talked to Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling in grim voice, "Tell me! How come you, two kids whose smell of mother's milk has not yet dried, can be that valuable?"

The two boys deeply regretted the fact that they did not know Haisha Bang was related to Yuwen Huagu; moreover, they did not expect Yuwen Huagu would give secret order to the clans and societies working for him to hunt and capture them. If they knew this fact, they would not risk being captured.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “If Bangzhu agree not to hand us over to Yuwen Huaji, we will tell you this secret.”

Han Gaitian tossed his head backward and roared in heroic laughter; gasping for breath, he said, “Did you see that? This kid has the audacity to bargain with us.”

Immediately the law-protectors under his command accompanied him in laughter. Another law-protector, the ‘Double Spears Charging Generals’ [the original rhymes: shuang qiang chuang jiang] Ling Zhigao said, “I heard You Meizi [younger sister You] said that these two kids know the technique to take a breath underwater; while obviously their martial art skill is lacking. This is extremely strange, there must be a reason.”

The pretty nun laughed tenderly and said, “Men! Give them three lashes; I want to see how profound their internal energy is!”

Amidst the roar of everybody’s laughter, immediately the whip rained down on the two boys. They were whipped at least a

dozen times; not only the clothes on their back shattered into small pieces, their flesh was badly mangled as well, as they stumbled face down on the deck.

But the two boys did not even let out half a groan.

When they were pulled up, Han Gaitian was emotional as he said, "The two of you indeed have strong backbones. These whips were infused with poison; if it were ordinary people, two, three lashes are all they can take. Considering this fact, if you are willing to tell me the truth, perhaps I, the Clan Leader, will deal with you differently."

Gnashing his teeth, Kou Zhong's voice was raspy as he spoke through his cracked lips, "Naturally there is a reason why we are so valuable. It is because we know the secret of Duke Yang's treasure-trove."

Suddenly the deck became very quiet, but everybody's eyes lit up.

Han Gaitian signaled his subordinates not to say anything, he pushed the pretty nun aside and stood up, "Let them stand up, untie them!" he called out.

The two boys were helped up, the ropes binding them were cut. Their clothes had been ripped by the poisonous whips, and

there were bloody stripes on their arms. When the two boys saw their own condition, they were horrified; however, the strange thing was that other than the searing pain at the beginning, they felt as if it was not a big deal at all.

Han Gaitian's iron-tower like stature was still two or three cun taller than the two boys. With hands behind his back, he walked over to the two boys and spoke in softer tone, "You really know Duke Yang's treasure-trove location?"

"Our Niang told us," Xu Ziling answered.

Han Gaitian nodded, "We also know about that," he said, "It was the female Luocha who rescued you. Why didn't she come with you?"

"Niang was killed by Yuwen Huaji," Kou Zhong sadly replied, "Therefore, we can't possibly tell him the location of the treasure."

Swaying her bottom, the pretty nun walked over to the two boys; she reached out to pinch Xu Ziling's cheek as she spoke with coquettish glances, "Bangzhu! Looks like these two handsome Xiao Xiongdi really aren't babbling nonsense. 'Man Tian Wang' [fill-the-sky king, see Book 1 Chapter 1] has wholeheartedly follow Gaoli's Luocha female's trail. Rumor has it that she pawned a piece of ancient jade. At that time we were still

in the dark, but now we ought to know that this piece of jade must be part of Duke Yang's treasure trove."

The 'Fat Assassin' You Gui said, "Now that two Xiao Xiongdi are here, this is a proof that the Heaven has chosen Bangzhu to fulfill your destiny."

Han Gaitian spoke in deep voice, "Where is the treasure trove?"

Kou Zhong stayed calm, but before answering, he exchanged flirting glances with the pretty nun, provoking an enchanting giggle from her, "The treasure trove is somewhere around the Emperor Guan Temple in Yangzhou, but it has to be opened using special technique; otherwise, you will never find the treasure."

The pretty nun threw her tender body forward, pressing her erect breasts against Kou Zhong's chest; she spoke in intimate manner, "Then why haven't you tell us, Bangzhu will definitely not treat you shabbily."

Kou Zhong obviously enjoyed this flirtation very much; he closed his eyes and moaned, "If Bangzhu is willing to give us ten taels of gold, we will help Bangzhu find the hidden treasure."

"Ten taels of gold is a small matter," Han Gaitian said, "Quickly speak up!"

The pretty nun stretched out her arm to pull Kou Zhong's neck, and planted a fragrant kiss on his face. Her smile was as pretty as the flower, "Listen to Jiejie, quickly speak up."

Kou Zhong giggled and said, "We are all Jianghu people. As long as Bangzhu take us back to Yangzhou, and swear a heavy oath not to kill us, and give us the gold, we will open the treasure-trove for you. Otherwise, we'd rather die than speak out."

Xu Ziling added, "The treasure is covered densely with mechanism, it is hidden over twenty zhang deep underground. Unless Bangzhu can obtain Yangzhou Zongguan approval to tear apart the citizens' dwelling within five li radius, and turn the ground upside down, don't ever think of getting into the treasure-trove."

Kou Zhong interrupted, "If we leave out even half a sentence, Bangzhu will never know. Why don't we become friends and strike a fair dealing by mutual agreement?"

Being barraged with 'I speak one word, you speak a sentence' from the two boys, Han Gaitian smiled wryly, shook his head, and said with a sigh, "It is really a waste that you, two little demons, did not go into business. Alright! I'll take you back to Yangzhou, but you must not lie to me, or else you won't have a good end."

And then he barked his order, "Men! Have them locked up in

the iron cage in punishment chamber.”

When Kou Zhong heard the two words ‘iron cage’, he immediately lowered his head to kiss the pretty nun’s lips, while groping her hair at the same time. When his mouth was busy clicking his tongue in admiration, his hand deftly pulled a silver hairpin and hid it in his palm.

The pretty nun angrily said, “Kid with lecherous mouth!” and pushed him away.

In the meantime, her subordinates stepped out to grab the two boys’ arms. Han Gaitian did not feel at ease, he personally escorted the two boys into the cabin, down the stairs into the lower deck, and into the punishment chamber filled with all kinds of torture instruments. He watched as his men pushed the two boys into a large iron cage on the corner, checked the lock to make sure it was engaged properly, and only then did he leave.

While Xu Ziling was staring blankly at the iron bars, which were as thick as a child’s arm, Kou Zhong stretched out his hand to show him the thin silver wire in his palm, and said, “I think Han Bangzhu is a good man; it would be best if we could work for him!”

Xu Ziling understood his intention; he caught on, “I just hope that when we get to Yangzhou we won’t be caught by Yuwen

Huagu. Ay! We know exactly where the treasure is, but we don't have the guts to pick it up."

Both boys were intelligent, seeing Han Gaitian and all his men withdrew completely without a single man remained, which was too unnatural, they knew these men would eavesdrop somewhere nearby; which was precisely the case.

Kou Zhong said, "Can you really remember the key to opening the storehouse that Niang taught us? It's too complicated for me, luckily your memory is always better than mine."

Xu Ziling replied, "I only remember the second half. Ay! At that time Niang was about to die, I cried so hard that everything was a blur to me."

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Leave the first half to me. It's something like three left seven right; I guarantee I won't make mistake. People are paying us high price, we have to hand over the goods."

Xu Ziling lay down on his side, stretched out, and said, "Go sleep!"

Kou Zhong lay down by his side; unexpectedly both of them really fell into deep slumber.

The big ship sailed at full speed in northerly direction toward the mouth of Yangtze River.

From sailing full speed, the ship suddenly slowed down. This change of speed caused the two boys to wake up.

They did not know since when did the wind lanterns on the four corners of the room go out; in this closed room, they could not even see the fingers in front of their nose. But they felt that the walls seemed to radiate some kind of dim light, so that they could faintly see the silhouette of the objects around them.

They felt very strange.

According to reason, Han Gaitian ought to want to arrive at Yangzhou as soon as he could; why did the ship slow down?

They sat up. Kou Zhong reached out to feel his back, and then he touched Xu Ziling's back; he could not help feeling very proud, "We have definitely become internal energy expert. Earlier we were beaten until our skin cracked our flesh lacerated, but now our skin is clear and our flesh smooth."

Xu Ziling spoke in low voice, "Could there be people out there listening to us still?"

Kou Zhong whispered in his ear, "Supposed someone can make

you the emperor, you don't have to suffer any hardship, would you or would you not send people to keep an eye on him?"

Xu Ziling was alarmed, "If we really get to Yangzhou without being able to escape, won't that Han Choutian [gai tian – covering the sky, chou tian – stinky sky] tear our skin and crush our bones?"

Kou Zhong took out the silver hairpin and said in low voice, "Let's see if we can open the lock or not. You see that this punishment chamber is full of sharp tools. With our superb internal energy, drilling a hole on the bottom of the ship should not be too difficult."

Xu Ziling sighed. "I know that," he said, "But how can we do it without making any noise?"

Kou Zhong came over to the iron cage door, he bent one end of the silver hairpin into a small hook, and then very carefully inserted it into the keyhole of the padlock. In no time at all there was a soft 'click'.

Xu Ziling was not surprised; he skillfully opened the lock and put it on the corner. Gently pulling the iron grille, the two boys crawled out like a dog.

By this time the ship was slowing down even more, they heard

rapid footsteps going back and forth on the upper deck.

The two boys were greatly delighted; immediately they looked for a tool they could use. Xu Ziling beckoned Kou Zhong to come over, he pointed to a stove on the corner with branding iron in it and said, "If we light the stove and heat the branding iron until red, perhaps we could burn a small hole on the ship's bottom noiselessly. And then when the seawater pours in, we could use the saw to open a big hole from which we could escape."

Kou Zhong patted his shoulder in praise. While Xu Ziling took a charcoal tinder next to the stove to light the fire, he took off his tattered outer clothes and stuffed it underneath the door to prevent the seawater to seep out prematurely.

In the meantime the ship was going faster again, while apparently also made a sharp turn, as if it was trying to avoid something. Above, the footsteps stopped, but there were footsteps in the corridor outside.

By this time Xu Ziling already dumped more than a dozen branding irons into the stove. Hearing the footsteps outside, he was startled and turned his eyes toward the door. Kou Zhong quickly positioned himself behind the door while signaling Xu Ziling not to show mercy by making a chopping gesture.

Outside, a man's voice was heard, "Any activity?"

And then two other male voices replied, “Nothing!”

The first man said, “The incoming ship belongs to Jukun Bang, perhaps that pretty Bangzhu has eaten some leopard gall that they dare to intercept us. Bangzhu ordered us to keep a close eye on these kids, or else we will be punished according to the gang rules.”

The two guards on duty promptly responded.

Noise of footsteps went away.

Kou Zhong promptly removed the tattered clothes he stuffed under the door.

They heard the sound of lock being opened, the thick wooden door was pulled open, dim lantern light shone in, but it was not bright enough to reach the iron cage on the corner.

The two unsuspecting guards came in; one of them even said, “Light the lantern first!”

But the other man saw the burning stove. While he was wondering about it, Xu Ziling’s fist struck his head like a lightning; immediately he slumped down, but Xu Ziling caught him before he reached the floor.

Kou Zhong made his move at the same time; he also knocked the other man down. He still had time to crane his neck outside to look, and saw three men standing at the corridor leading to the stairs. The men were looking at him.

Luckily Kou Zhong was quick-witted; he raised his hand in greeting, and then quickly closed the door again. Luckily the corridor was dimly lit, plus his movement was very quick, so that the men could not see his face clearly. But he was so scared that his heart nearly jumped out of his throat.

The two boys took off the men's clothes and used it to tie them and stuffed their mouths. Only then did they feel a bit better.

The two men's money bags had already entered Kou Zhong's pocket, while Xu Ziling untied the men's short halberd and sword. Although they were not as accustomed in using these weapons as a saber, but it was definitely better than without a cun of iron in their hands and thus making them feel lost.

Xu Ziling picked the smoldering branding iron and placed it on the cabin wall. A 'chi, chi' sound ensued, followed by smoke rising up from a charred wood. When he removed the branding iron, as expected, a glowing red indentation appeared on the wooden plank.

Kou Zhong plugged the bottom of the door again.

This time Xu Ziling pressed three branding irons to the indentation, creating more smoke, and burning the plank red.

The ship made another sharp turn; it seemed like the Jukun Bang people were getting really close. There were faint shouting from above, coupled with the sound of urgent footsteps. The situation was getting more and more intense.

‘Pop!’ The branding iron finally penetrated the wood plank; seawater immediately came gushing in.

The two boys cheered. Using the saw that they prepared in advance, they desperately sawed the wood to make the hole bigger. The seawater continued to pour in; very soon it reached their ankles. Soaked by the cold water, their two prisoners woke up.

‘Crack!’ Kou Zhong sawed the plank until only a small section left, which he then pulled and twisted as hard as he could to break it. Immediately a large triangular hole appeared.

The two boys did not have time to hesitate. They cut the knot binding their two captives first to let them untie the rest of their bind, and then they slipped into the sea underneath the ship.

Haisha Bang flagship was moving rapidly forward, the bottom of the boat they stole along with the salt appeared above them. The ocean surface was bright with the yellow glow of the moon; hence the boys knew it was already evening.

Kou Zhong did not care whether Xu Ziling wanted it or not, he simply dragged him up toward the surface.

Who would have thought that the ship was sailing too fast? By the time the two boys reached the surface, the salt boat has just slipped right through them.

As soon as they had their heads above water, they were dumbstruck. Because Haisha Bang's five ships were besieged by more than a dozen smaller sailboats.

Both sides were shooting fire arrows and throwing rocks at each other, the raging battle has reached the state where neither side could extricate themselves. The rockets lit the night sky.

Kou Zhong had his eyes fixed on the stolen boat, which was getting farther and farther away. While he felt like crying, but did not want to shed any tears, as he looked at their fortune turning into water, suddenly the stolen-salt boat separated from Haisha Bang flagship and slowed down. Apparently someone thought that the stolen-salt boat was too cumbersome and had the mooring rope cut off.

The two boys were overjoyed at the turn of events; hastily they swam with everything they had toward their happy future.

Book 2 Chapter 8 – Clan Leader Of The Fairer Sex[1]

While the two boys were running around in circle trying to unfurl the sail, the battle was moving away from them. Now the moonlight shining on tranquil sea became dozens of small dots.

A sea breeze blew. The boat sailed toward the shore at high speed.

Kou Zhong crouched on the sacks of salt that was lost but now was won back. He mumbled at himself, and was so happy that nearly went crazy.

Xu Ziling was at the helm; he suddenly called out, “We’ll reach the shore very soon!”

Kou Zhong sprang up and saw the pitch-black land ahead was getting larger and larger at an alarming rate. Aghast, he called, “Can we slow down?”

“We can’t!” Xu Ziling called back.

That night happened to be high tide, plus the wind was strong, the boat sailed like an unbridled horse running away on an open field; it was totally out of control.

Kou Zhong pointed to a spot that looked like a sandy shore, “Steer toward that place!” he called out.

Xu Ziling turned the rudder, the sailboat changed course on a slightly oblique angle, speeding toward the sandbar.

Kou Zhong was about to cheer, suddenly his countenance changed. “Not good!” he cried.

Xu Ziling was also shocked. Turns out under the moonlight they could see that all around them there were reefs sprouting from the seabed. That they had not had shipwreck by now was indeed a miracle.

‘Screech! Screech!’ The hull emitted such a harsh grinding noise. The boat was pushed to the right, the two boys lost their balance and fell into the water.

‘Crash!’ The boat ran into an especially huge rock and disintegrated immediately. All the salt went down to the bottom of the ocean.

The boys managed to swim across the shallow water; the lower half of their body was still immersed in continuously rushing tide.

Their body weary, their strength exhausted, the two boys lay face down on the sand, while continuously gasping for breath. Their mouth and nose were bloody from the collision with the reef, while their body was bruised all over. It was not even clear when did their weapons fall off.

However, the physical pain they suffered was far less than the emotional pain they suffer from losing the salt.

The effort they spent on stealing this batch of salt has become their highest standard of struggle, it had an incomparably deep meaning for them, and it has thrown them into an endless rollercoaster of emotion.

Yet in the end the salt was gone. Just like that.

When salt meets water, won't it vanish without trace?

Xu Ziling spat out a mouthful of saltwater mixed with his own blood. He groaned, "Those who have never been underwater will never know that the seawater is so bitter."

Kou Zhong wanted to laugh, but he choked and coughed hard,

“Who told you to drink it? Ha! Fortunately I still have a couple of money purses. Ah!”

Xu Ziling groaned. “Don’t tell me: you lost your purse as well!”

Kou Zhong smiled bitterly. “That’s exactly what happened,” he said, “Don’t blame me! Next time you’ll take care of it.”

Xu Ziling made a show of turning his head around; after giving him a quick look, he sighed and said, “Zhong Shao, is your tummy hungry? It seems to me that we make another progress in martial art; for two days and one night we did not eat a single grain of rice, but I am not that hungry.”

“Don’t mention the word ‘hungry’,” Kou Zhong sadly replied, “Ay! I am so tired that I feel like dying.” Finished speaking he buried his face into the sand.

Xu Ziling also felt senses faded; finally he succumbed to his weary body and fell asleep right there.

The next thing he knew, someone was slapping his face, hard. Kou Zhong’s excited voice penetrated his ears, “Heavens! Get up! This time gods and fairies are helping us.”

Xu Ziling opened his eyes; the sky was very bright. He sat up with blank expression, but as he turned his eyes, he was

dumbstruck.

The tide has receded a hundred zhang or so, exposing the spacious seabed, littered with jet-black reefs. Those dozens of sack of salt, along with the debris of the boat and everything else left after the shipwreck, were strewn over the rocks; it was indeed a breath-taking, magnificent sight.

Kou Zhong ran toward the nearest sack of salt. Xu Ziling was overwhelmed with fiery emotion. He sprang up, and only then did he realize that most of the wounds and bruises on his body were completely healed. Other than his growling empty stomach, he felt that his entire body was full of energy. Hastily he ran after Kou Zhong.

Kou Zhong was shouting and yelling in excitement, “My Niang! All these salt have become hard lumps; nothing dissolves in water. This time Laotianye really appeared.”

Xu Ziling saw something among the rock crevices flickered under the sunlight; in great delight he threw himself in that direction. As expected, he found the sword. And then, not too long afterwards, he found Kou Zhong’s short halberd. After losing everything and gaining it back, the happiness in their hearts was something that no pen and ink can describe.

Kou Zhong still wanted to find the two money purses, but after

suffering untold hardships, he could only find one; no matter how hard he searched the other one simply eluded him. Upon opening it, unexpectedly he found five silver ingots and some change; in his heart he was extremely grateful to Laotianye.

The two boys were afraid the tide would come back; busily they moved the sacks of salt ashore. After working hard until nightfall, they counted forty-eight sacks of salt; two sacks went missing; most probably when the boat disintegrated the sacks burst.

By this time the two boys were so hungry that they no longer feel it. Hastily they went to the forest by the shore to pick some wild fruits to allay their hunger.

Returning to the shore, they saw the tide was rising again; the waves were crashing onto the reefs, spraying seawater everywhere. They felt like they had just been granted a new lease of life.

The two boys stood facing the ocean. They still had the feeling that the enemy might come anytime, hence they went to the nearby forest to find a safe place to hide, and once they found it, they moved all the salt there, and covered everything with leaves. Only then did they snuggle up to sleep.

In their semi-conscious state, they felt like they were back at that little valley where they buried Fu Junchuo, training internal

energy to withstand the cold night.

About midnight, they heard noises coming from the shore. The two boys were shocked; taking their weapons, they crawled behind a large rock where they had a clear view of the beach and took a peep.

They saw two small boats anchored at the beach, more than a dozen men with torches in their hands were carefully inspecting the debris of their boat that was washed to the shore.

Farther away into the ocean, they saw eight medium sized two-mast ships, but they did not look like Haisha Bang battleship.

Kou Zhong whispered, "Loot at that girl, she is prettier than our Niang!"

Xu Ziling turned his attention to the woman. She was wearing lake-water-green [i.e. teal] colored warrior outfit, covered by long white cape on the outside. Her beauty was something that those who saw her would forget about taking a breath. It was the first time that he saw such a classy woman.

Kou Zhong's throat suddenly created a 'glug' noise; he was swallowing his own saliva, "If I can spend the night with her, I am willing to have my life cut by three days."

Xu Ziling let out a 'ha'; he nearly guffawed, but quickly covered his mouth. Who would have thought that the woman was a martial art master indeed? They were about twenty zhang apart, yet his laughter could not escape her ears; she immediately turned her head in their direction, scaring the two boys that they instantly shrunk back behind the huge rock.

After quite a while, the beach became quiet, they breathed a sigh of relief. How could they still dare to have devious thought?

Kou Zhong said in low voice, "Even in term of martial art this beautiful woman [orig. poniang, see Book 1 Chapter 4] could be superior to our Niang, but she is still outwitted by us, Two Dragons of Yangzhou."

Suddenly a sweet-sounding, alto voice calmly descended from above, asking, "Was she really outwitted by you?"

The two boys were so scared that their soul flew away and scattered; they rolled toward the sloping grassy knoll first before springing up, holding a halberd and grasping a sword, putting on a false bravado, but in their hearts they were seriously lacking confidence.

The Bloody Battle Ten Styles they learned from Li Jing, only Xu Ziling had the opportunity to test it in armed combat with the enemy, but that one time he was useless to the extreme that he

even lost Li Jing's treasured saber.

Therefore, the thing that these two boys lacked the most was real combat experience; so if they were not scared in the face of battle, that would be strange indeed.

That stunningly beautiful woman sat leisurely on the rock, she even had a wind lantern sitting next to her, shining its light on half of her so that it looked like her beautiful figure was glowing, adding some mysterious, yet pure and holy aura to her already out-of-this-world beauty.

The white cape against the lake-water-green warrior outfit, made her look exceptionally charming, very pleasing to the eye.

The woman looked at them with her cold gaze, and said emotionlessly, "I really don't understand how could these two virtue-less, incompetent street urchins stole the 'Secret to Long Life' from under Yuwen Huaji's nose, and then swindled Du Fuwei until his head and face were filthy with grime, and now you even messed with Haisha Bang that their head spins. Tell me! Do you always have your good luck charm with you?"

Hearing this, the two boys looked at each other with eyes open wide but their tongue tied. How could this woman know them like the back of her hand?

Ashamed, Kou Zhong put his halberd down and used it to prop himself against the grassy ground. In deadly earnest he said, “May I ask Miss’ honored surname and great given name? Who are you? How come toward Zaixia [lit. under, referring to self] two brothers’ matter you seem to be very familiar [orig. as if enumerating one’s family valuables]?”

The pretty woman let out a cold snort and said, “Am I not called a woman [poniang]? How come now I become a Miss? Such an inconsistency, evidently you are a despicable man.”

Kou Zhong’s countenance fell, “You call that despicable?” he said, “Even if in your heart you are dying to kill the opponent, but on the surface don’t you still need to be polite? In this world who has never had his mouth in disagreement with his mouth? You, this ... hey! You, this Miss, how much more noble do you think you are compared to me?”

It was very rare that Xu Ziling saw Kou Zhong lost his temper like that; he was completely blown away.

The pretty woman stared at Kou Zhong for half a day. Suddenly ‘Pfft!’ she burst out laughing. “You little demon, you have quite a stinky temperament. But don’t blame your Miss for not warning you: as far as I’m concerned, I kill people like splitting gourd or chopping vegetables; no hesitation whatsoever.”

Xu Ziling finally came to his senses, he could not help exposing her bluff, “You want to make your move then make your move! Why bring up that much superfluous words?”

Kou Zhong stuck out his chest and said, “Those with enough guts don’t need to call others for help. You alone against the two of us.”

The pretty woman did not stop laughing; she laughed so hard that her body trembled like fluttering twigs. “Looking at your appearance: clothes not covering your body, scars and bruises all over, yet you have devious thought of the two of you can beat me, one person. Ay! Dead little demon! You made me laugh so hard that it hurt.”

Xu Ziling angrily said, “Do you want to fight or not? If not, we’ll go back to sleep.”

Naturally the pretty woman was able to see his hard shell but empty inside, showing strength while weak inside. She reached to her back and pulled a clear, golden-colored copper xiao [Chinese flute[2]], about four chi long, placed it horizontally on her lips, and blew a clear note, like a cool breeze entering their ears. And then she placed the flute on her jade legs, looked down on the flickering flame inside the wind lantern, and said softly, “Can you not view people with hostility? The reason I did not hesitate to declare a war with Haisha Bang was precisely because I wanted to

see if we have any possibility of cooperation.”

The two boys looked at each other in confusion, but there was also a little bit of ‘overwhelmed by favor from superior’ feeling.

Kou Zhong reaction was comparably quicker; with a giggle he also sat down on another big rock, nodded his head, and said, “Miss [or Young Lady; here he used ‘guniang’, whereas previously he used ‘xiaojie’] please state your attractive conditions first, so that we can see if we can reach any agreement.”

The pretty woman did not even cast him a glance; she still acted as if she was talking to herself, “Shall I give them a hard beating first, so that these two little demons will behave a bit more?”

Kou Zhong jumped in fright; he adopted the first stance of the ‘Bloody Battle Ten Styles’, the ‘Two Armies Encamped Face-to-face’.

Being treated with ‘sudden hard and sudden soft’ by her like that, the two boys felt a headache.

[1] Original title: Rouge and Powder Clan Leader.

[2] Xiao usually refers to vertically blown flute (as opposed to Dizi, traverse flute), yet the next sentence says ‘horizontally’ or ‘across’. I don’t know, perhaps I misunderstood the sentence.

The pretty woman suddenly turned her pretty face toward them, her phoenix eyes flashed a cold ray as she focused her attention to size the two boys up, while they were still adopting a pretentious stance. She spoke coldly, “If you must know, the reason I spoke so many words with you is because this Bangzhu thinks very highly of you, hence I am thinking of inviting you to enter our Jukun Bang and become this Bangzhu’s first and last disciples [orig. ‘open the gate’ and ‘close the gate’, respectively].”

The two boys were stunned; with different mouths, same voice, they cried out, “My Niang!”

It was certainly beyond their wildest dream. How could this pretty woman, who was at most only three, four years older than they were, unexpectedly want to take them as her disciples?

The ‘Clan Leader of the Fairer Sex’ Yun Yuzhen was not in the least apologetic, “What’s so surprising about it?” she asked, “Learning has never known early or late; those who attain it become the master, who’s to blame if your skill is so lacking? You don’t even know the technique of holding a weapon.”

Xu Ziling was disappointed, “Even holding a weapon also has technique?” he asked.

“Of course!” Yun Yuzhen snapped, “Just by looking at how you

grip the sword hilt with so much strength like you want to crush it I know that you don't know the key to holding weapon. 'Light and floating is actually tight'. 'Too far is as bad as not enough' [an idiom from the Analects]. Without instruction from a bright master, how would you, this little kid, know?"

Kou Zhong was afraid Xu Ziling might lose face, he changed the subject, "Didn't you say earlier that we are virtue-less and incompetent? Why the sudden change of attitude, condescending first and became very respectful later? Is it because of the 'Duke Yang's treasure-trove' and the 'Secret to Long Life'? After receiving us as your disciple, you will tell us that we must not disobey master's order, so in order to make you, Senior, happy, in the end we will obediently present the treasure to you."

Yun Yuzhen stared at him blankly for half a day with an amused look in her pretty eyes. Finally she said in a gentle and soft voice, "If I, Yun Yuzhen, am conspiring to get those two things, let me, Yun Yuzhen not die a good death."

And then, pursing her lips she laughed and said, "Perhaps you did not know, after Du Fuwei failed to find you, he returned to Liyang. One day he suddenly laughed. Naturally others asked him why did he laugh? He mentioned you, the two kids, saying that the two of you were born as amazing martial art materials. Although he has inspected innumerable people, he has never seen anybody with better natural endowments than you, hence

his heart was moved with ‘loving talent’ thought. It’s just that he hated it that you got away, so now he only wants to get rid of you.”

The two boys felt as if their faces were burning.

What she just said seemed to be words of compliment, but coming from her mouth it sounded a lot more ambiguous.

Xu Ziling awkwardly asked, “How could you even know what Du Fuwei said?”

“It’s none of your business,” Yun Yuzhen nonchalantly replied, “In today’s world, other than Dou Jiande and Li Mi, two people with original insight, I am afraid nobody can surpass Du Fuwei. Therefore, this Bangzhu has the intention to take disciples. How about this, I don’t care if you do obeisance to me as your Shifu, but if Haisha Bang catch up with you, don’t blame anybody for not coming to your rescue.” Her eyes shot another cold ray as she said, “The ‘Secret to Long Life’ is just a trick the Taoist school uses to scam people. As for the Duke Yang’s treasure trove, it is only attractive to people who dream of becoming the emperor. I have to spare time to join that muddy water and come after you, these two big-head ghosts.”

Kou Zhong was not happy at all, “You want to be our, Yangzhou Two Dragons’ Shifu, at least you need to show your ability.

Otherwise, if you can't even withstand our sword-halberd combination, how do you know that you'll have enough capital to be our Shifu?"

Yun Yuzhen agreed, "You spoke so much words, only these last several words actually made some sense."

Knowing that she was about to make her move, the two boys were in full alert.

Since they grew up in the marketplace, they had a deep understanding of the old-age immutable law 'anything that is easy to get is not worth coveting'. Such a 'thousand-lovely, hundred-charm' beauty with respectable status wanted to take them as her disciples, there must be evil intention or hidden plot somewhere; it's just that they could not penetrate her thought yet!

Yun Yuzhen grabbed the lantern with her left hand, and pulled the flute with her right hand, she slowly left the big rock she was sitting on. Her cape fluttered endlessly behind her back, just like a firefly transforming into a beautiful woman, as she flew across over the two boys' head.

First, they never expected that she could possess such a move; second, they were a bit afraid to hack and injure her beautiful jade legs. Therefore, they scattered to the left and right in a

flurry. Who would have thought that she used their heads as stepping-stones instead?

Yun Yuzhen landed behind the two boys; she laughed tenderly, “My disciples, do you submit to me now?”

The two boys’ faces turned beet-red. Exchanging a glance, they launched a converging attack from left and right. By this time they already knew that her martial art skill was extremely strong, hence they no longer show leniency, and attacked her with everything they had.

Xu Ziling originally used the third stance of ‘Bloody Battle Ten Styles’, the ‘Light Cavalry Charging Ahead’. If he were using saber, he would have moved the saber from the waist out in a feign attack toward the enemy’s pit of the stomach. If the enemy withdrew, he would change into saber hack sideways; but because he was using sword, he lost the ‘flavor’ of the attack; hence he might as well halted his step and aimed for her shoulder. Fast as lightning the sword moved upward.

Kou Zhong’s situation was even worse; he had no idea how to use the short halberd, which differed considerably from a saber. He was going to launch the second stance, ‘Exposing the Tip of the Fire Beacon’, but he had to make slight modification. Borrowing the momentum of his revolving body, he swept across Yun Yuzhen’s flank.

Yun Yuzhen let out a tender laughter, the lantern in her left hand rose up, illuminating the fine hair on Xu Ziling's head, who was on her left, while the copper flute in her right hand very lightly, as if she did not use any force at all, tapped the tip of Xu Ziling's sword. At the same time, the cape on her back fluttered forward to meet Kou Zhong's short halberd.

‘Bing! Bang!’

The two boys felt a soft, yet hard to resist, internal energy burst in via their weapons, and spread into their body via the channels on the hollow of their palm and through their arm, just like an electric shock, so that they nearly dropped their weapon. They both backed off in a very awkward position.

Yun Yuzhen was even more shocked than they were.

Actually, she was trying to force her true energy into the opponent's vital acupoints; who would have thought that as her energy reached the opponents' shoulder, the stream of energy toward Xu Ziling felt like clay ox entering a sea of people; it disappeared without any trace, it dispersed into nothingness. The one going into Kou Zhong was pushed back by a rather overwhelming force.

The three people separated; they all looked at each other with astonishment.

Frowning, Yun Yuzhen said, “If LuoCha female taught you guys internal energy training, you ought to have similarity with the origin; but why is yours distinctly different? Tell me honestly, quick!”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “You saw how profound is our internal strength, didn’t you? Beautiful Shifu.”

Xu Ziling laughed aloud and said, “We are amazing martial art materials, naturally we developed different characteristics.”

Knowing her superb martial art skill, yet she was still unable to injure them, the two boys found it exceedingly interesting, hence their hearts and hands were itching. Besides, looking at her beautiful appearance and lovely attitude was enough to give them pleasure.

Realizing that ‘the master has not captured the disciples’ reverence’, Yun Yuzhen’s pretty eyes shot a cold ray as she swiftly flitted to Kou Zhong’s left, while her copper flute pointed to his face.

Kou Zhong clearly saw her movement, and he knew exactly what to do to block it, yet his body moved a bit slow; by the time his short halberd swept across, not only the tip of his nose was already hit, a sweeping kick had also landed on the side of his

thigh. Immediately he fell to the ground with miserable groan, completely dejected and depressed.

Xu Ziling rushed forward to the rescue, brandishing his sword that it made whooshing noise to protect his own face. Who would have thought that Yun Yuzhen simply pointed her flute, and it penetrated his airtight sword net, and hit the middle of his forehead?

Xu Ziling felt as if he was struck by a lightning bolt; he was thrown backward and landed flat on his back.

Looking down at the two boys, who were momentarily unable to crawl back up, Yun Yuzhen said tenderly, “I don’t know where you learned those moves, which mainly rely on offensive, but you don’t know that all these moves are ‘disregarding life, seizing life’, staking-it-all kind of fierce moves. If there is no determination to die together with the enemy, you won’t be able to unleash the full power of the moves.”

Groaning and moaning, the two boys stood up; their body felt numb from the shock of her qi, they no longer had any strength left to fight. Hearing her explanation, admiration grew in their hearts, because Li Jing had said the same thing. Evidently this woman’s insight was extremely superior.

Yun Yuzhen had increased her internal strength significantly,

yet these two boys were able to stand back up this quickly; in her heart she was greatly amazed as well.

Apparently she did not have the real intention of taking these two boys as her disciples, she only wanted to use them to do something that was extremely important to her. But they had to be delighted and completely willing to do this thing, so that they would use various means to achieve the objective.

However, right now her heart was moved with the real intention to take them as her disciples. If they succeeded in this mission, in time these two boys would turn into her capable assistants.

Kou Zhong sighed, "We always hold womenfolk in the highest regard, therefore, how could we have the heart to harm you ..."

"Shut up!" Yun Yuzhen angrily said, "You have the guts to speak that kind of frivolous words to me, are you asking for a beating?"

Xu Ziling hastily said, "Whatever it is, let's talk about it slowly. You want to accept disciples to impart your skills, the other party must be delighted and sincerely willing for it to happen. Right now we do not have the mind to do obeisance to you as our master yet. Is it possible for us to finish our business dealing first, and then we all come back to discuss the feasibility of this matter later?"

At first Yun Yuzhen's jade face turned frosty, but then it revealed a smiling expression. Totally beyond the two boys' expectation, she said nonchalantly, "Very well! You two may think it over carefully."

With a sway of her body, she was back on top of the big rock. With a tender voice she said, "Haisha Bang won't spare anything trying to capture you back. You take care!"

With another charming laughter she disappeared behind the big rock.

The two boys looked at each other; they felt disappointed to see her leave instead.

Suddenly Yun Yuzhen came back. But when the two boys were secretly delighted, she instructed them just like a master lecturing her disciples, "It would be best if you completely erase any trace of you on the ground. Also, make it to appear that you have left far away from here. In the meantime, hide up here quietly for a month or two; otherwise, you won't be able to escape Haisha Bang's inescapable net."

Book 2 Chapter 9 – Early Glimpse Into The Mystery

By the time Yun Yuzhen and the troops under her command left, it was almost dawn when the two boys finished dragging the sacks of salt into square-shaped piles that was empty in the middle. With their body weary and their strength exhausted, they entered the square and immediately fell into a deep slumber.

By that afternoon, voices from the shore have woken them up. The two boys crawled up and saw more than a dozen fast boats anchored on the shore. What attracted their attention the most were Han Gaitian and the pretty nun. Terrified, the two boys shrunk back and returned to the forest.

Fortunately Yun Yuzhen had given them direction earlier; otherwise, this time it would be like their wings have been plucked and not able to fly.

The two boys did not even have the courage to go outside to pick wild fruits. Even when the voices have gone, they still hid inside their cozy nest.

That evening suddenly a rain came. Luckily they had built roof from tree branches and sogon grass mixed with mud, which was able to deter most of the rainwater, so that the trickling water inside their nest was still bearable.

Kou Zhong happily said, “This rain is so timely, it will wash away the traces on the ground; that Han Pudi must have thought that we are already far away from here.” [Translator’s Note: play on words: gai tian – covering the sky, pu di – falling face down on the earth/ground.]

Xu Ziling could not help laughing, “Gai Tian Pu Di, these names are as brilliant as that Yuwen Huagu.”

Kou Zhong reached out to stroke the almost-a-cun-long beard on Xu Ziling’s face. He laughed and said, “Xiao Ling, you look a bit more macho now, it’s just that your beard is a bit shorter than mine. Do you want me to pull them clean by my miraculous hands, so that you’ll become ‘little white face’ [i.e. pretty boy]?”

Xu Ziling pushed his hand away and said, “When our beard grew until we can’t even recognize ourselves, then we can go sell our salt for profit. Do you understand?”

Kou Zhong slapped his thigh in praise; but then he said in distress, “Is our martial art skill that lacking? Why did we clearly

feel in our heart that we would be able to block our beautiful Shifu's jade move, but our hands and feet did not want to obey us?"

Xu Ziling mused, "I never thought about that. In my opinion, we learned an exceptionally amazing power from the 'Secret to Long Life', but we still cannot apply it to the moves. Moreover, each type of weapon has its own unique characteristic, which we have not grasped yet. Naturally we cannot use it as our hearts' wish."

Kou Zhong raised his thumb to praise him, "This kid is amazing, he actually came up with the same idea I did. This proves that your natural endowments are as good as mine!"

They chatted and joked until darkness fell, and then the two boys slipped out. After they saw that the Haisha Bang people have left and not a single one remained, they left to find wild fruits to allay their hunger under the cover of darkness.

After that, the two boys tore each other apart on that beach and sparred against each other in high spirit. They thought that they might as well take off their clothes and just wore shorts, playing in the sea waves joyfully. It was not until Xu Ziling accidentally made a minor scratch Kou Zhong's arm did they stop their sparring.

Lying on the beach, the two boys found their interest waned,

because no matter how diligent they trained, the true qi within their body and the styles of their movement could not be fused into one. Other than obtaining more understanding on how to use their weapons, it could be said that they did not gain anything.

Not too long afterwards, the two boys fell asleep.

When Xu Ziling awoke, bird songs entered his ears. He opened his eyes and looked up, and happened to see a seagull circling over the sea, its bearing natural and graceful, it looked so carefree and happy. The seagull suddenly dove down at an angle into the water. When it reappeared, there was a wriggling, struggling small fish in its claw.

Watching this, Xu Ziling's mind was severely shaken. He grabbed Kou Zhong at his side and said in hoarse voice, "I understand it!"

To his surprise, he was grabbing an empty space. Looking all around, he did not see any trace of Kou Zhong. Xu Ziling jumped in fright and shouted, "Kou Zhong!"

Suddenly something emerged from the sea; it was Kou Zhong. He saw on one hand Kou Zhong was holding his sword, on the other hand he had a big fish. Immensely proud of himself he called out, "Today we won't have to nibble those bird's tasteless

wild fruits.”

Xu Ziling did not say anything. He fetched the short halberd lying beside him and rushed toward Kou Zhong, who was walking from the sea to the beach. “Kid, take this!” he shouted.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud while brandishing his sword to meet the attack, “Little thief, you are asking for death!”

At this time Xu Ziling’s mind was filled with the image of the trajectory of the seagull swooping down into the sea, his heart and mind in harmony, his intention and his hand working together, he completely grasped Kou Zhong’s sword movement and his footwork, as well as his speed. He let out a long whistle, while imitating the seagull’s trajectory, the short halberd drew an arc in the air.

The most amazing thing happened.

The sole of his left foot heated up, but the sole of his right foot turned incomparably cold; exactly the opposite of what usually happened during his training, where the sole of his right foot would heat up first.

The amazing thing was not limited to this at all. Previously, the heat would appear first and then the cold. This time however, the heat and the cold occurred together. Followed by two separate

streams of qi, one hot and one cold, rushed upward from the Yong Quan [gushing spring] acupoints on the soles of his left and right feet, passing through the Yin Qiao channel on the inside of his legs, and reached the Sheng Si orifices on his crotch, passing through the Chong channels on his left and right chest, and returned to the Jiang Guan position below his heart, the cold and hot qi converged to become one stream, going down the Dai channel, extending toward the small of his back left and right, and going up along the Du channel toward his shoulders, and rushed down via Yang Shu channel on the outside of his elbow. The true qi flowed naturally, without human interference at all. [Sorry, I am sure my translation is off since I know nothing of Chinese medicine.]

‘Dang!’ Amid the miserable groan, the palm of Kou Zhong’s hand was jolted open, his sword was thrown backward.

The two boys stopped instantly and just stared at each other blankly.

Meanwhile, the strange qi within Xu Ziling’s body kept flowing along the Yin Shu channel on the inside of his elbow, and returned to Jiang Gong, down to Sheng Si orifice, following the Yin Qiao channel inside his leg. It flowed back to the Yong Quan acupoint before vanishing.

Kou Zhong tossed away the fish he caught and used that hand

to hold his other hand, which was very painful, while he squatted in the shallow water. “What bird’s thing was that?” he cried out. [Translator’s note: I just realized that Kou Zhong used the word ‘bird’ a lot ...]

Xu Ziling plopped himself down in the water and said in ecstasy, “I got it now! Niang, Du Fuwei, our beautiful Shifu Bangzu, were right. ‘Secret to Long Life’ does not have anything to do with martial art, however, it is the key to unlock the mystery of the universe. We have heard it before that human body is a small universe, while the world outside our bodies is another universe. Therefore, as long as we can grasp the natural essence of these two universes, inner and outer universes will merge together, and will be fused into one entity. Just like the move I have just launched.”

This remark, perhaps only if Guang Chengzi [see Book 1, Chapter 1] came back to life would he be able to infer it clearly. However, even if top-notch expert listened to this, he might still be confused. As a matter of fact, it was precisely the martial art’s highest, most ideal principle of oneness of heaven and humanity.

By lucky coincidence Xu Ziling arrived at this conclusion and simply blurted it out, but he did not know that his remark would be the starting point of their journey to become the peerless martial art expert of this age in the future.

Throughout history, no one has ever obtained this comprehension. Of course, one of the many reasons was that no one has ever imagined that they would blindly and randomly train the internal energy cultivation according to the ‘Secret to Long Life’ either.

Xu Ziling explained what he saw about the seagull. Kou Zhong was greatly delighted; he picked up the sword and roared, “Try it again. Remember that you can only strike this martial art expert’s sword.”

Xu Ziling acknowledged the order. Grasping the short halberd, he repeated his strike just now.

‘Ding!’ Kou Zhong blocked it with all his strength.

Xu Ziling was disappointed, “How come this time it didn’t work?”

“Go back to the beach,” Kou Zhong instructed, “Rush forward just like you did last time. The problem could be that you have not generated enough heat in your body.”

Xu Ziling thought it made sense; he did as Kou Zhong instructed. Who would have thought that it was still completely useless? The brilliance was gone.

Afterwards, no matter how they trained, they could not reproduce the formidable power of that one strike. Finally the two boys lay down dejectedly on the beach, extremely frustrated.

Kou Zhong turned around to lie face down on the fine sand, with his fist he hammered the ground, “What is the problem?” he asked.

Xu Ziling had a brainwave, “That day when Li Dage was seriously injured and lost consciousness, you went out to find a mule cart, I was bored and practiced Li Dage’s ‘Bloody Battle Ten Styles’. That time Jiejie was scared and told me to stop, because my saber emitted hot wind and saber aura. But afterwards, when I fought the enemy for real, I could not generate either hot wind or saber aura. Worse yet, as soon as I met the enemy face-to-face, my saber was twisted and thrown away. If we could figure out why it was so, maybe we could solve the problem.”

Kou Zhong’s spirit was greatly aroused; he sat up and asked, “When you practiced your saber play that time, what did you think?”

Recalling the situation that time, Xu Ziling said slowly, “Nothing. I just wanted to practice my saber play so that I could protect Li Dage and Jiejie, and not let them to come to any harm.”

Greatly shaken, Kou Zhong said, “I got it. It’s what Niang told us

about forgetting everything, inside and out; no-man no-self, the borderline between with and without intention. Just now you when you attacked me, basically you did not expect that it could be that formidable, hence you were able to reach the realm where inside and outside universes converged completely and became one entity, exactly like Niang said, ‘forgetting everything, inside and out’. Afterwards, you had the intention, hence you could not achieve the same realm.”

That was what they said, but for the following ten days or so, the two boys practiced from morning till evening, yet all along they failed to achieve the effect they wanted, that strike that was as if a divine being was behind it.

However, they were, after all, young boys. They were accustomed to live a lazy life back in Yangzhou; unexpectedly, they stopped training altogether, and just spending their days hunting for fish in the ocean, feeling totally free and at leisure, and very cheerful.

One day, when they returned from the sea to the beach, Kou Zhong said, “Did you notice how the fish escape our catch? At first they concentrated their attention completely, and then with a flick of their tail, they slipped away at an unimaginable angle, and it also made full use of the stream characteristics. If we could copy some of successful skill, even if our beautiful Shifu returned, perhaps it wouldn’t be so easy for her to beat us askew to the left and collapse to the right.”

Xu Ziling's spirit was greatly aroused, "I have not thought about that. Come! Let us find some fish and learn from them."

And that was how they spent their days. The two boys integrated frolicking and training martial art, while rising and lying down, working and resting. Gradually they returned to the lifestyle of when they lived in that small valley; they talked less and less.

When Kou Zhong trained internal strength, he would walk back and forth on the beach, while Xu Ziling would lie down unmoving.

One moving, the other still; each one had his own interest.

One day more than two months later, the two boys were chasing a big black carp when Kou Zhong slashed with his sword. The slash plainly missed, but to his surprise, the black carp was jolted, turned belly up, and died. There was no scar on the outside, but when they cut it open, unexpectedly its internal organs were ruptured.

At first the two boys were startled, and then their shock turned into great delight; henceforth they trained more diligently.

It's just that Xu Ziling preferred to emulate the birds; he loved to watch eagles hunting the seagulls, and learned from their flying

posture. Kou Zhong, on the other hand, observed and learned from all kinds of fish; he also watched how the crabs moved sideways to dodge, and their tactics in attack and defense. It could be said that the two boys were addicted to what they were doing.

Even while eating, they exchanged what they had learned, as well as sparred against each other. They also modified Li Jing's 'Bloody Battle Ten Styles' to fit their own style better. However, all along they still failed to attain the thunderous strike Xu Ziling previously produced. Nevertheless, the two boys were very happy, since they were much closer to achieve the 'what the heart wishes, the hand accomplishes' level.

One day they woke up and walked to the beach, to their amazement they found two baskets sitting side by side on the sand. Inside they found two sets of clothes, and a couple of warm, thick, winter clothing.

They found written on the sand: 'When the moon rise tonight, we'll meet here. Don't forget to put on clothes. Shifu.'

It was only then did the two boys realize that their clothes were tattered beyond repair. They looked at each other with a mixed feeling of delight and worry.

What did she want?

That night Yun Yuzhen indeed came. She wore a snow white warrior suite with yellow golden trim, her hair was rolled up in a bun on top of her head like a man, tied with yellow warrior band. All in all, her appearance cried out heroic, straightforward, melancholy, but there was also a beauty in it that dazzled and stunned others. Just like last time, she also carried an exquisite wind lantern in her hand, and the long copper flute on her back.

She had the two boys to sit cross-legged first, and placed the wind lantern between them. After scrutinizing them, she said in great astonishment, “We have not seen each other for only two months, how come not only you look taller, you also grew a bit of dignified, masculine look? The strangest thing is that your bearing is totally different. Just by looking at your eyes, I can tell that you have made great progress in your internal energy cultivation.”

Kou Zhong stroked his thick beard and said with a laugh, “Just by relying on this guy, I look a lot more bold and powerful naturally.”

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong saw each other every day, naturally they did not pay particular attention to the changes in the other’s appearance; but in Yun Yuzhen’s eyes, the changes indeed cause her to have a whole new level of respect for them.

Moreover, the two boys’ temperament and demeanor were distinctly different.

Xu Ziling appeared to be more aloof and outstandingly talented, he had the refined, scholarly yet unrestrained temperament that Kou Zhong lacked. But he did not have the brutish, wild and lazy impression, which made Kou Zhong look boorish, but heroic and relaxed.

Speaking about their statures, although Kou Zhong was about a cun shorter than Xu Ziling, his shoulders were broader and his back thicker, giving him an imposing physique, and made him look more heroic and ferocious.

Another reason was that Xu Ziling had delicate features; he looked a bit more like an elegant scholar. On the other hand, Kou Zhong had thick eyebrows, square face and big ears, which stood in stark contrast against Xu Ziling's comparatively slimmer and handsome face, giving people the impression that he was the more rough and wild one.

Two boys, each with his distinct features, each with his own attractiveness.

Yun Yuzhen was wondering in her heart, why was it that last time she saw them, she did not pay attention to their outward appearance, but this time she could not help noticing their physical characteristics?

Thinking about this, her pretty face could not help turning warm; busily she tried to cover up her embarrassment by saying, “I sent people to monitor you a few times, each time they report back to me to you were enjoying yourself either on the beach or in the water. How did your internal energy improve then?”

Xu Ziling shrugged his shoulders and said, “We are playing, but never forget to study hard. But after playing for two whole months, we got bored playing, and are thinking of going out there. Beautiful Shifu, do you have any good advice?”

Yun Yuzhen did not know whether she should laugh or cry; but in her heart she was happy, “Finally you are willing to recognize me as your Shifu,” she said.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Yun Bangzhu, please don’t misunderstand. A Shifu is a Shifu. But by calling you ‘Beautiful Shifu’, we, two brothers are simply giving you a nickname, just like Yuwen Huagu and Han Pudi; it is a unique name we are giving you.”

Yun Yuzhen did not know whether she should be angry or she should feel amused; she wanted to put on a cold expression and scare them a bit with a couple of harsh words [orig. tiger’s roar], but in the end, “Pfft!” she could not help giggling and said coquettishly, “You two big-headed ghosts, do you think I really want to take you, two little demons as my disciples? It’s just that I

see some benefit in you, hence I took a good care of you.”

The two boys looked at each other with an ‘I knew it’ smile on their face.

Yun Yuzhen was irritated; she angrily said, “Believe it or not, I could put your martial art skill to waste, so that the two of you would return to your original shape; it’s much better than seeing you annoying like this.”

Kou Zhong leaned forward and laughed, “Beautiful Shifu mustn’t be that cruel, hee! Remembering that your treatment to us is actually not bad, why don’t you tell us your difficulties and needs! As long as there is enough reward, and it is a small thing that is easy to do, perhaps we will be willing to help you!”

Yun Yuzhen did not stop smiling; she cast a malicious sidelong glance at him and said with a sigh, “You, two little demons, don’t even know that your death is at hand. Right now you have become the target of hunt-and-capture competition of several powerhouses. If even one of them managed to catch you, based on lesson learned from their previous mistakes, you may forget about escaping. If you knew what’s best for you, you’d better curry favor from this Bangzhu right away!”

And then she quickly added, “If I want to harm you, it will be as easy as turning my hand over. I only need to let out the news, I

guarantee you won't find a place where you can fit in."

Xu Ziling was puzzled, "Your martial art skill far surpasses ours, and you have countless subordinates; why do you have to entangle us and insist that we'll have to do it?"

Yun Yuzhen indifferently said, "Have you heard about Dong Ming Pai?"

The two boys stared blankly for half a day, and then they nodded together.

Yun Yuzhen laughed and said, "I merely test you out, to see if you are really honest. The fact is, you have come in contact with them, and you jumped from their ship to the sea, and that night you spoiled Haisha Bang's plot to attack them sneakily. Is my information wrong?"

The two boys listened with their eyes open wide and their tongue tied.

Kou Zhong let out a mouthful of cold air and said, "Turns out you also have spies inside Haisha Bang."

Yun Yuzhen said tenderly, "The truth is, every single clan and society in Jianghu needs huge expenditure. Take Haisha Bang and Shuilong Bang for example, their principal income is from

smuggling salt; hence they, along with our Jukun Bang, can be numbered among the eight Clans and ten Societies. Among the eight Clans, the most despicable, no-good at all, is Baling Bang, whose base of operations is Dongting Lake [northeast Hunan province]. They specialized in trafficking women, supplying the brothels across the world [tian xia], their profit is also the biggest.”

Xu Ziling’s voice cracked, “Isn’t there anybody in Wulin? Why would they let this kind of gang exist?”

Yun Yuzhen was unhappy, “Right now the world is in chaos, every gang has to have strong backing, otherwise they will be consumed by others. Behind Haisha Bang there is Yuwen Clan, Shuilong Bang has become Song Clan’s guard dog, Baling Bang’s backstage boss has even greater power, because he is the present old man the Emperor.”

The two boys were speechless. It’s no wonder that everyone wanted to crusade against the old man Emperor.

Kou Zhong sucked in a mouthful of air and said, “In that case, Beautiful Shifu, which strong hand is your backing?”

A hint of proud smile escaped from the corner of Yun Yuzhen’s mouth; she casually said, “I am just I am, there is no need to rely on anybody else to survive. Besides, everything I sell is first-hand

intelligence. Don't think that I only recognize money and don't recognize people; unless it's people whom I, Yun Yuzhen, can't look at them with my eyes. I don't care how much money they offer, don't even think that this Bangzhu would sell them half a word of information."

Xu Ziling said in hoarse voice, "Intelligence can be sold for money like other commodities?"

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "No wonder you know everything about us in great details. Turn out this is what you do for a living [orig. the rice you eat]."

"Know yourself, know the enemy, then you will come unscathed through a hundred battles [from Sunzi's 'The Art of War']," Yun Yuzhen said impatiently, "Right now the world is in chaos to the level that is unprecedented throughout history; those who can control the enemy troops' deployment, their strength and weaknesses, and the actual condition of the soldiers, will have the chance to dominate the world. My business actually emerged to meet a historic destiny. Were it not for this, I am afraid we'd have been taken over by others long ago."

"In that case Beautiful Shifu," Xu Ziling wondered, "You ought to want to know about the 'Secret to Long Life' and Duke Yang's treasure trove."

Yun Yuzhen calmly replied, “Those are different matters altogether. ‘Secret to Long Life’ is the treasure of the Taoists; even in their dreams those who practice Taoism yearn to obtain this heavenly book. But it has nothing to do whatsoever with the struggle to dominate the world. As for Duke Yang’s treasure trove, basically that female Luocha did not tell you anything; otherwise, you, two little demons who are dying to get rich, would not have gone to Yuhang to steal salt. Ha! Duke Yang’s treasure trove in Yangzhou? Only idiots like that Han Pudi would believe it.”

Kou Zhong was astounded, “Beautiful Shifu, you are so formidable, it would be better if you marry the two of us ... Ah!”

Yun Yuzhen moved her jade hand to reward him with a slap on the face; she coldly said, “Even if I don’t have any sweetheart, I won’t even consider you, two kids whose smell of your mother’s milk has not yet dried.”

Stroking his cheek, Kou Zhong giggled, “In that case, Beautiful Shifu already has a sweetheart.”

“What business of yours is that?” Yun Yuzhen bluntly said.

Xu Ziling suddenly said, “This is called ‘relying on force to maltreat the weak’. When we master the martial art in the future, you will know how it feels.”

Yun Yuzhen smiled and said, “I am looking forward to that day! Alright! Let’s talk business: the two of you accomplish something for me, this Bangzhu will let you off. Otherwise, no matter where you go, I only need to broadcast the information, and when you come across Yuwen Huagu, Han Pudi, Du Fuwei, or what have you, what will the consequences be?”

“It’s a threat,” Kou Zhong said with a wry smile.

Yun Yuzhen said softly, “Other than coercion, there are incentives as well, to guarantee that you won’t refuse. I will pass on to you some kind of lightness skill first, so that when you flee to the end of the world in the future, you have some asset to run away. Ay! It must be that I, Yun Yuzhen, owed you something in the past life that I am most willing to pass on my most outstanding skill to you, yet I don’t even have a real status as your Shifu.”

The two boys were greatly touched; if they could really fly on and off the roof, they would be willing to give up three years of their lives.

Kou Zhong quickly smiled apologetically and said, “Albeit a bit reluctantly, we are willing to admit that you are our Beautiful Shifu; how’s that?”

Xu Ziling was a bit more principled than he; he probed further,

“We simply won’t do anything to offend Heaven and reason; much less murder and arson.”

Yun Yuzhen was peeved, “You think you have that ability?” she said, “Little thief is just little thief; if I don’t want you to steal something, what do you think I want?”

The two boys were greatly baffled; speaking about stealing, wouldn’t she be more competent and well-suited?

Yun Yuzhen looked at the sky to determine the time; she said, “Don’t ask too much, of course there is a reason behind it. After you steal that thing, I will also give each of you ten taels of gold. If you are afraid of death, that should be enough for you to live incognito and live the rest of your life in peace. Right now I am going to pass on the key theory of the lightness skill to you, one month later I am coming back to catch you, a pair of dead little demons. At that time I am going to tell you what object to steal.”

Subjected to such a formidable coercion and bribery, naturally Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling ‘readily’ agreed.

Yun Yuzhen’s lucid and elegant beautiful face revealed a sweet smile; she gave the two boys several glances first, and then, after they were intoxicated by her charms, she turned serious as she said, “My lightness skill was created as the convergence of different schools’ chief skills; it is called ‘Wu Du Shu’

[crossing/passing-through crow technique]. In Wulin it is revered as ‘amazing skill pinnacle art’; it is extremely famous. So don’t think that I simply pick some random low-grade martial art skill to cajole you.”

Xu Ziling was puzzled, “What is ‘amazing skill pinnacle art’?” he wondered aloud.

Yun Yuzhen said, “I don’t have time to explain to you, but Du Fuwei’s ‘Xiu Li Qiankun’ [universe in his sleeve] and Yuwen Huaji’s ‘Bing Xuan Jin’ [mysterious ice energy] are two of those.”

After a short pause, she continued, “The so-called lightness skill is just like fish swimming freely in the water; it’s just that you replace the water with the air and wind filling the space above the earth. The most crucial point is, first and foremost, how to reduce body weight and how to breathe in the air. My ‘Bird[1] Crossing Technique’ put emphasis on the trajectory of gliding through the air. Because your internal energy already has good foundation, with only one month training according to my technique, you will see small progress.”

The two boys did not dare to interrupt; they listened attentively, while the excitement in their heart felt like blazing fire.

Yun Yuzhen asked them how they circulate their energy.

Finished listening, she pondered for half a day and then said with disappointment in her voice, “Practically I have never seen internal energy like yours; I am afraid I don’t understand and cannot give you any directions.”

The two boys were greatly anxious. Xu Ziling said, “Why don’t you tell us your secret technique first, and then we’ll find a way to train it.”

Yun Yuzhen sighed and said, “You don’t seem to know there is something called fire deviation.”

Kou Zhong sneered and said, “Our internal energy cultivation is called ‘capable person is not capable of achieving’. Beautiful Shifu, please tell us quickly! At most when your sweetheart does not want you anymore in the future, you will have us as the replacement.”

Yun Yuzhen stared angrily at him. When the scared Kou Zhong rolled away to evade, she said in a grim voice, “If anything bad happened to you, don’t blame me for not giving you forewarning.”

“The first step of ‘Crow Crossing Technique’ is to understand what favorable and adverse qi is. The so-called favorable qi is when an object is thrown upward, it must fall down as soon as the momentum is exhausted. The adverse qi is when the

momentum is exhausted, this is the qi being generated so that the upward momentum can continue. Only those with true qi inside their body can accomplish this.”

Subsequently she spoke a string of secret keys, telling the two boys to memorize everything, as well as giving the boys some instructions on how to jump and the technique to take a breath. Finally she sighed and said, “If during training you feel something is not right, you must not force yourself to continue. Ay! I have to go!”

Lifting up the wind lantern, she infused the lantern with her internal energy; the wind lantern immediately flickered randomly. Soon afterwards from a distant place on the surface of the sea came the responding flashing of lantern light. It was only then did the two boys find out that the lantern was actually a communication device.

The two boys were rather reluctant to part.

Yun Yuzhen looked at them, and then with a slight sigh she said, “I hope when I come again next time, you will still be alive and kicking [orig. lively dragon and animated tiger]!”

[1] FYI, previously, the text says ‘crow’ 烏; here, it changes to ‘bird’ 鳥. My guess is the OCR, but since I don’t have the book, I

can't tell which one is the correct one.

Book 2 Chapter 10 – Classified Account Book

Kou Zhong jumped down from a giant rock about three zhang high. ‘Whump!’ he landed hard on the beach; dizzy, and could not tell one object from another.

On the side, Xu Ziling squatted and looked down; with a bitter laugh he said, “Our Beautiful Shifu was right. Her ‘Bird Crossing Technique’ is basically unleashing the way of circulating qi and taking a breath; with our so-called peerless divine skill it is a totally different thing, as if the two will never be mixed together. Looks like our qinggong is just a sweet dream, from now on we can just knock it off and lay it down to rest.”

Kou Zhong turned over to look up to him and said, “Can you not concede that quickly? Remember our great theory! We can unleash the true qi within our body, and the only way to unite the inner and outer into one entity is by forgetting ourselves.”

Distressed, Xu Ziling said, “The problem is that were just common folks, we can’t to reach the state where we are able to jump high or leap low every time. Hey! I have a very stupid idea.”

Kou Zhong suddenly sat up and said, “Since you can think of an idea for such a difficult problem like this, it must not be a stupid idea.”

“Do you remember that strange encounter when we jumped from Dong Ming Pai ship into the sea?” Xu Ziling asked.

“I can’t forget it even in my dreams!” Kou Zhong replied, “We were nearly drowned to death.”

With a serious face Xu Ziling said, “But not only we did not die, we also acquired the ability to breathe under water. It is clear that when we are in some kind of desperate situation, we can naturally, like Niang said, bring out the innate quality that is buried deep within us. This hidden treasure has been opened by the fantastic skill of the ‘Secret to Long Life’, but only in life and death crisis this hidden treasure can be forced to come out.”

Kou Zhong looked up to the boulder from which he had just jumped down; his countenance changed as he said, “You are not suggesting that we jump down together from a hundred zhang cliff, are you?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Xu Ziling said, “What are we afraid of? If underneath is the ocean, we won’t fall to our death.”

Kou Zhong shook his head, “No, can’t do,” he said, “Only if there is a risk of our body torn and our bones crushed will our true qi be forced to come out.”

This time Xu Ziling’s countenance changed. “Are you serious?” he asked.

With solemn expression Kou Zhong said, “A hundred zhang cliff is just an exaggeration. I am afraid even our Beautiful Shifu will fall until her jade body perishes and her fragrance vanishes; ten or so zhang should be enough. Ay! Xiao Ling! Let Laoge [old brother, referring to self] try it first! If I really fall to my death, just cremate me, and then bring my ashes back to that small valley where Niang is buried. If your heart to become Wulin’s martial art expert is dead, you can be a good chef quietly; and if you have a son in the future, just change his name to Xu Zhong, to commemorate your great brother!”

Xu Ziling’s voice cracked, “Tell me you are joking!”

Kou Zhong shook his head, “After seeing Yuwen Huagu, Du Fuwei, that kind of people, you will no longer be willing to live a dull life. After coming across beautiful women like Niang or our Beautiful Shifu, it will be very difficult to take an ordinary woman as my wife. I really want to fight this challenge; if I win, it’s very possible that I will master an exceptional qinggong, but if I lose, I will go down the Yellow Springs[1] to find Niang and show a bit of

filial piety. Do you understand? My good brother.”

Xu Ziling sat down dejectedly; but suddenly he burst in laughter, “You are always greatly persuasive; if you want to die, let’s die together.”

The two boys stood at the edge of a high cliff. Looking down at the underbrush and scattered rocks dozen or so zhang below, they hesitated.

“Seems to be a bit high,” Kou Zhong said in a low voice, “We are really stupid; we forgot to ask Beautiful Shifu how many zhang a beginner martial art master can jump.”

Xu Ziling looked up toward the magnificent starry sky. “Shall we go back to sleep?” he asked with a wry smile.

Kou Zhong took a deep breath, closed his eyes and said, “We’ll count to three, and then we jump together. Just remember to ... ay, don’t try to think about anything, let the nature take its course.”

“One!” Xu Ziling shouted.

“Two!” Kou Zhong caught on.

And then the two of them screamed together, “Three!”

Four legs kicked the ground, like a bullet the two boys left the edge of the cliff to enter the empty air outside the cliff.

In that split second, all kinds of profound, unforgettable memories, such as: they were playing and swimming in the stream and met Fu Junchuo, her death, they were being carried by Du Fuwei as he rushed across the open field, strolling along the street with Susu, being treated in a cold manner by Qingqing at the brothel, the stunning beauty of Yun Yuzhen when they first met her; were flitting through their mind like flashes of lightning, or like the flying sparks of a flint, followed by a blank. And then they started to sense that they were falling, fast.

In the instant they were hovering between life and death, suddenly they were completely without any access to external qi, however, their internal breathing was like a torch. 'Bang!' It lit up with an explosion.

Just like a dream.

All of a sudden, they understood the secret to speed up the movement of true qi within their body. They must first sever the outer physical breathing before unleashing the true qi inside the body. This is precisely what the Taoist School said about innate breathing.

The two boys' body was like ant marching, the true qi went back and forth endlessly. Xu Ziling's started from Yong Quan going up, Kou Zhong's from Tian Ling passing down.

At the same time they remembered Beautiful Shifu's Bird Crossing Technique, quickly they raised a mouthful of true qi, their palms pushed down, and applied the 'adverse power'. Immediately there was an opposing force in vertical direction; unexpectedly their descending speed experienced substantially reduction, and there was still enough force left over to push them back about half a chi up. Turning a somersault in the air, 'wham' they landed on a pile of thick underbrush so hard that all they saw in their eyes were stars.

Kou Zhong was the first to crawl up. "Niang!" he shouted loudly, "We succeed!"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling finally made an incomparable step in their martial art journey, a crucial breakthrough. Although there was still a considerable distance from the level of true martial art experts, but it was an important step in the right direction.

One day Xu Ziling suddenly had a weird idea; he pulled Kou Zhong along to train martial art at the bottom of the sea. Trouble is, they could not get a stable footing. Thereupon they each tied a big rock on their leg, and this seemed to improve their situation.

Gradually they discovered that they could channel their qi and focused it in their legs, so much so that they were able to withstand the attack of the undercurrent, hence they did not need to rely on the rocks anymore.

With this discovery, they began to experiment rising up and sinking down in the water, which made their training more delightful.

Back to the dry ground, after the underwater experience, they were able to train the Bird Crossing Technique until the 'what the heart wishes, the hand accomplishes' level. They could easily leap over ordinary a zhang, or perhaps two zhang tall trees, and on the way down, they could even show off a variety of poses and fancy postures.

When they sparred against each other with weapons, they followed the same steps to gradually able to channel their qi onto the weapons.

Tonight was the big night, the appointed day for them to meet Yun Yuzhen. The two boys dressed neatly and waited at the beach.

After sitting down, Kou Zhong thought for a moment and said, "We must guard against the people's heart. I forgot who said that; was it Niang, or Du Fuwei?"

“I think it was Niang,” Xu Ziling replied, “You don’t seem to trust our Beautiful Shifu.”

Kou Zhong said, “Wulin’s martial art masters are always enigmatic, we can’t let people see through how much weight we carry [i.e. importance]; therefore, it would be best if we hide our true power, don’t let Beautiful Shifu find out we have mastered her Bird Crossing Technique. Supposing she really wants to harm us, we still have a bit of asset to flee.”

Xu Ziling nodded his agreement; he turned his eyes toward the ocean and said, “Look! Look!”

A dot of light appeared on the surface of the ocean; the dot rapidly growing bigger. A fast boat passed to the left and swerved to the right among the reefs and came to the shallow water.

The two boys focused their eyes. Very soon they could see the boat clearly. Four men were rowing the boat, on the bow stood a young woman wearing white warrior outfit, but she was not Yun Yuzhen.

The girl soared to the air; in just two leaps she already arrived in front the two boys, and spoke respectfully, “Xiao Bi [little maid servant] Yun Zhi, on Bangzhu Miss Yun Yuzhen’s order to invite two Gongzi to get on the boat.”

They did not anticipate this move from Yun Yuzhen. After exchanging glances, they followed Yun Zhi to board the small boat.

Aboard the three-mast ship, Yun Zhi led the two boys into the main cabin to see Yun Yuzhen, who was sitting in a plush chair. The two boys sat up straight in the chairs to her left and right, and Yun Zhi withdrew, leaving only the three people in the cabin.

Yun Yuzhen smiled, “How’s your training?” she asked.

Assuming an ashamed look, Kou Zhong shook his head. Catching on, Xu Ziling flawlessly sighed and said, “As soon as we started, the qi and blood in our body surged; how could we dare to continue?”

Yun Yuzhen found it hard to conceal her disappointment; bowing her head, she was lost in thought for a long time before finally managed to say, “Since you can’t train it, we have to make another plan.”

The two boys immediately understood, although Yun Yuzhen said all those good things, the fact was that teaching them qinggong was part of her plan so that they could use it to accomplish their mission. They could not help rejoicing inwardly for not telling her the truth.

Yun Yuzhen sighed again before asking, “Do you know why Dong Ming Pai let them come aboard their ship that day?”

[1] Yellow Springs, underworld in Chinese mythology, equivalent to Hades in Greek mythology.

Kou Zhong replied, “Every year they come to the Central Earth to select some young men with natural endowments to be brought back with them; needless to say, those men are to be the women’s husbands, is that right?”

Yun Yuzhen said, “Tell me everything that happened after you came onboard, don’t omit anything.”

Kou Zhong only needed several sentences to explain everything; because the chain of events that day only happened in the time needed to drink half a cup of hot tea.

Listening to him, Yun Yuzhen’s pretty eyebrows were knitted; it was quite some time later that she finally said, “This is strange, why did Madame Dong Ming ask you those strange questions?”

Xu Ziling replied, “Do we need to tell you that? Since they are selecting son-in-law, naturally they are looking for some guys with aspiration and ambition. Realizing that we are just two boys who are crazy about riches, they chased us out of the ship in anger.”

“You are not asking us to steal their stuff, are you?” Kou Zhong wondered, “If that’s the case, won’t it be better for you to make the move yourself? They only need to remove the rope ladder, and we won’t be able to climb up.”

Yun Yuzhen was impatient, “If I have a choice, why would I want to rely on you, these two little demons?” she said, “Right now, only you can stroll and swagger into their ‘Floating Fragrance Flagship’.”

The two boys were stunned. “Beautiful Shifu must be mistaken,” Kou Zhong said, “I am afraid you and us are not on Madame Dong Ming’s welcomed guest list.”

Yun Yuzhen said, “This time and that time are two different things. Right now you have rendered great merit to Dong Ming Pai, Madame Dong Ming even dispatched her subordinate, the four law protector fairies to go everywhere to look for you; it’s just that they have not found you!”

The two boys’ spirit was immediately aroused; remembering that pretty young maid, their hearts warmed up instantly.

Yun Yuzhen smiled, “You understand it now?” she asked, “I could arrange that they coincidentally find you, and thus you will have a good chance of going into the ‘Floating Fragrance

Flagship’.”

Xu Ziling said, “Actually, you have not even told us what is it that you want us to steal!”

Yun Yuzhen nonchalantly said, “Do you remember I told you that every clan and sect has their own way of earning a fortune? Dong Ming Pai’s expertise is in manufacturing high-quality weapons; this fact is extremely well known in Jianghu. Out of ten divine arms and sharp weapons, at least three were forged in their Ryukyu factory.”

Xu Ziling suddenly came to a realization, “So you want us to steal weapons.”

Yun Yuzhen was irritated, “Other than divine arms and sharp weapons like Gan Jiang and Mo Xie[2], there is nothing good to be stolen. What I want you to steal an account book of a great importance.”

The two boys looked at each other in incredulity.

Yun Yuzhen’s pretty eyes flickered. “This account book records all Dong Ming Pai’s weapon transaction in the last few years; both the seller and the buyer must sign and affix their seals, and it also lists the quantity as well as the type of weapons being sold. Yuwen Huaji ordered Haisha Bang to attack the ‘Floating

Fragrance Flagship', it was precisely for the sake of this account book."

Listening to this, the two boys were totally confused and were at a loss.

Yun Yuzhen continued, "It also involves the power struggle within the imperial court. For instance, certain high-ranking minister secretly purchased a large quantity of weapons from Dong Ming Pai, this account book becomes irrefutable evidence that will allow Yuwen Huaji to submit a memorial to the Emperor and thus drag his opponent down. Do you understand it now?"

Kou Zhong said, "But Beautiful Shifu is not Yuwen Huaji; why do you want to obtain this account book?"

"You don't need to mind my business," Yun Yuzhen replied, "In short, just get me the book, in turn I will set you free and give you the promised gold. If you are willing to try, while there are still ten days or so time, I will have my people teaching you first-class technique in stealing. Are you clear?"

There was a knock on the door, Yun Zhi came to report, "There is a small boat coming to us from behind; it's probably Li Gongzi."

Yun Yuzhen's powdered face turned slightly red from annoyance; she said, "That shameful, annoying @\$hole keeps

entangling me; let him come aboard.”

After a short pause, she added, “Take these two little demons go see Grandpa Chen.”

Seeing how happy she was at the prospect of seeing that Li Gongzi, the two boys were already upset. Now that she wanted to get rid of them, the two little demons, their ego took a hard beating. With anger and resentment they followed Yun Zhi out.

Following Yun Yuzhen’s order, Yun Zhi took them along the hallway of the upper deck and came to a door. Knocking the door, she said, “Grandpa Chen! Two Gongzi are here.”

An old-sounding voice came from inside, “Have them come in!”

Yun Zhi pushed the door open and tell them to come in on their own.

The two boys stepped into the room, and discovered that the room was surprisingly very big. Spread all over the room were all kinds of padlocks, scaled building models, and some tools of unknown purpose. The walls were covered with a lot of architectural drawings. Unexpectedly they were inside the ship’s main workshop.

A decrepit, hunchback, old man with long beard was taking

apart a padlock and examining it carefully by the window. Without even casting a glance to the boys, he said with his hoarse voice, "Shut the door!"

Xu Ziling pushed the door closed.

The old man put down the lock and went over to them. Because he was shorter by more than half a head than the two boys, he had to look up to them. After seeing clearly the two boys' faces, he let out a hollow laugh and said, "I heard that you two have been stealing and swindling since childhood. Ha! Put out your hands first, let me take a look."

The old man reached out to the two boys' four hands, grabbing and pinching left and right for a while, he expressed his astonishment, "I have never seen hands better than yours. Apparently very soon we will have two better pairs. Ha! I, the Ol' Chen will have my successors."

With hands behind his back, he walked away and only stopped at the window. Staring out the window, he said, "Trying to steal things, apart from a pair of dexterous hands, one must be quick witted and able to change according to the situation, plus having excellent understanding of the building, its construction, mechanism, and so on."

And then he strolled back and beckoned the two boys to come

over to a building model on the table. “This building complex is made of ten courtyard houses of different sizes. If I want you to steal a piece of precious jade, how would you find where the jade is?”

Noticing the two boys only return blank stares, he seemed to be immensely proud of himself as he moved to another model and said, “Do you recognize this one?”

Kou Zhong’s voice was hoarse, “Isn’t this Yangzhou Zongguan’s mansion?”

“Precisely Yuchi Sheng’s doghouse,” Ol’ Chen replied, “Actually, stealing is not too difficult. If I want you to steal a classified dossier, after reading all that stuff you must memorize everything written inside in your brains, and then return the dossier to its original place, the owner will not know that the files have been seen by others, now that would require not only outstanding skill, you must also have photographic memory. Oh! Do you know how to read?”

Kou Zhong was already suspicious of Yun Yuzhen, naturally he would not tell him the truth. Pretending to be ashamed, he said, “How could we have the opportunity to go to school?”

“I won’t blame you,” Ol’ Chen spoke sympathetically, “Luckily this time the mission does not require you to read.”

Taking the two boys to a drawing hanging on the wall to their left, he said, “This is the ‘Floating Fragrance Flagship’, which you have been to. The blackened parts are places where we are not yet clear.”

The diagram showed ‘Floating Fragrance Flagship’ in stereoscopic perspective, but the main cabin section below the deck had been blackened.

Like an unceasing torrent the Ol’ Chen explained everything, but the two boys found it fascinating, hence they listened attentively, while asking questions from time to time.

By daybreak, Yun Zhi came to take them to the room at the end of a long hallway toward to bow to rest. The two boys put down their heads and slept peacefully and did not wake up until evening.

Two pretty maids came to wait on them as they took a bath, changed their clothes, shaved their beards and combed their hair into a bun. When Yun Zhi returned to take them into the main cabin, her elegant eyes lit up as soon as she saw them; she said in astonishment, “Turns out two Gongzi are so handsome; indeed I failed to admire that.”

Seeing she was so pretty and pleasant, Kou Zhong leaned over

and said, “How old is Jiejie this year? You seem to be almost at the same age as we are?”

Yun Zhi crossly said, “Definitely your senior. Come!” She turned around and walked away.

The two boys realized she was looking down on them; after exchanging frustrated expression and eye contact with each other, they followed her.

Arriving at the main cabin, they saw a dinner table was already prepared with food and wine, but there were only three seats, and one of them was already occupied by a big man in embroidered robe. His face looked ugly, with an approximately two cun long saber scar on his left cheek, giving out the impression that he was a cruel man; but his pair of eyes was flickering lively, so with one look people could tell that this was a martial art master with exquisite inner power.

The man was actually very polite. He stood up to welcome them and said, “Jukun Bang Fu Bangzhu [Deputy Clan Leader] Bu Tianzhi at your service. Yun Bangzhu has a business to attend to and has left for the shore, assigning the Ol’ Bu to take up the responsibility to greet the two Xiao Xiongdi.”

work, Legend of the White Haired Maiden (Liang Yusheng). I thought I repeat it here for reference:

This pair of swords was said to be created by a pair of husband and wife sword smiths who lived during the end of the Spring and Autumn era (722BC-481BC) and were said to be apprentices coming out from the same school as the master sword-maker Ou YeZi who crafted the Dragon Springs Sword. Having crafted two of the finest swords of their career, they named these two swords after themselves Gan Jiang (literal translation: Competent General), Mo Xie (literal translation: Do not be/commit evil).

There appears to be various stories and legends surrounding these two sword-makers. It was said that though they worked for the Lord of the state of Wu (He Lu), yet Gan Jiang was also unjustly executed by the Lord of Wu because he did not want Gan Jiang crafting equally superb swords for the other states. Another story posits that it was Gan Jiang who crafted the pair of swords and named them after his wife and himself. He worked for the Lord of Chu and having anticipated that his lord would kill him immediately upon receiving this sword, he voiced these fears to his pregnant wife and left behind one sword buried under a large tree so that his unborn child may one day take revenge for him. Indeed, upon presenting the Gan Jiang sword to the Lord of Chu, Gan Jiang was executed.

When their son Chi Bi (literal translation: Scarlet Nose) grew up, he dug up the sword and swore revenge for his father. But unable

to approach the Lord of Chu, he narrated his story to a noble warrior from the Chu state, who having been touched by his story promised to seek revenge for him. According to legend, it was this warrior who by presenting the Lord of Chu with the Mo Xie sword as a decoy, beheaded the Lord of Chu with this very sword and knowing that being surrounded by numerous soldiers he would be unable to escape, this warrior beheaded himself with the very same sword. There was yet another legend which posits that Gan Jiang collected together the essence of the highest grades of gold and metals belonging to the five mountains (probably: SongShan, TaiShan, HuaShan, Northern HengShan, Southern HengShan) and combined them together within a forge. But the heat of the forge was not enough to melt the metals and since the metals were unable to merge together, his sword was unable to be completed.

Gan Jiang knew that his failure to finish the sword according to his deadline would lead to his execution by the Lord of Wu and as a result was filled with despair. Suddenly, during one night, his wife smiled at him, causing Gan Jiang to be greatly worried as he pleaded for her to not commit what he feared she would do. But she only smiled and by the time Gan Jiang woke up, he found that she had already disappeared. He ran to the place where they crafted the swords and saw his wife standing by the forge smiling at him. But before he could reach her, she had already thrown herself into the fire. Her last words to him were that of reassuring her husband that she has not died yet and that they would eventually reunite. The metals finally melted and combined together to finally complete the pair of Gan Jiang, Mo Xie swords.

Gan Jiang only presented the Gan Jiang sword to the Lord of Wu and secretly kept the Mo Xie sword by his side. But the Lord of Wu eventually discovered this news and had his men surround Gan Jiang.

At that time, Gan Jiang opened up the box, which contained the Mo Xie sword and asked the Mo Xie sword how he could ever be reunited with his wife. But the sword instantaneously transformed into a great white dragon, which suddenly disappeared along with Gan Jiang himself. Similarly, the Gan Jiang sword, which was by the Lord of Wu's side all this time mysteriously disappeared as well. Meanwhile, in a district called the Pin (destitute/impoverish) Cheng (City) located a thousand miles away appeared a young white dragon that suddenly emerged in their YanPingJin lake.

This majestic dragon was not only beautiful, but also kind-hearted and by calling upon the power of rainfall and the force of wind, it enabled the destitute city to benefit from the weather and prosper in its agriculture. As a result, the city was also renamed as Feng (Prosperity) Cheng. But the inhabitants found that the white dragon seemed always to be very unhappy as it looked towards the shores as if forever waiting for or pining away for someone with eyes filled with tears. After six hundred years, a young man named Lei Huan suddenly discovered a box buried within the ground. Upon opening the box, he discovered that it concealed the legendary Gan Jiang sword.

Pleased with his finding, he hung the sword by his side and one day, when he past by the YanPingJin lake, the sword that hung by his waist suddenly leaped up into the air and dived into the lake. There was a great commotion in the waters when suddenly two dragons leaped out, one white dragon and one black dragon. These two dragons danced together in joyful happiness before returning to the bottom of the lake, only to disappear forever. The next day, a husband and wife moved into the town. They were merely an ordinary couple and although the husband was a very skilled blacksmith, yet he only crafted the ordinary tools used in everyday agricultural life while his wife stood by his side, fanning him with a little fan and wiping away his sweat.

Seeing their Beautiful Shifu was not present, and thought that she must be with that Li Gongzi, the two boys felt extremely disappointed; it's just that they could not resist the temptation of food, so they replied perfunctorily with some polite remarks, and then sat down to gorge themselves, pushing all unpleasant thoughts to the back of their minds.

Bu Tianzhi was not talkative either; he spoke one minute and was quiet the next. He only asked the two boys' past experience. Kou Zhong gave him some made up stories, yet he seemed to be very satisfied.

At the end of dinner Bu Tianzhi beckoned his subordinate to

fetch an embroidered case, opened the lid, and took out an exquisite looking book. The cover was embossed with Dong Ming Pai insignia, which was of the same pattern as the embroidered flag of the Floating Fragrance Flagship.

The two boys looked at Bu Tianzhi in astonishment.

Bu Tianzhi did not say anything; he simply opened the first page. They saw the page was densely packed with small characters, written in black, ink stick, and vermillion, ground cinnabar ink. On one side was the type of weapon and its quantity, written in black, on the other side was the amount of money paid, written in vermillion; to their surprise, the unit of currency was gold, the highest amount reached three thousand taels of gold, which was more than enough for an ordinary person to eat for more than ten lifetimes. There was also a note on the date and place of delivery.

The most shocking was that written at the top was ‘Li Clan the First of Longxi’, six characters [long xi li fa di yi], but there was neither signature nor seal.

Kou Zhong pretended to be confused. “The letters recognize me, but I don’t recognize them,” he said, “What does it say here?” he pointed to the top.

Bu Tianzhi turned to the second page, but it was blank.

Bu Tianzhi turned back to the first page and said, “What we are asking two Xiao Xiongdi to steal is precisely this account book. When you open the book, the first page will look exactly like this. You must remember it carefully, don’t make any mistake.”

Xu Ziling probed further; pointing to the character ‘yi’ [one/first, which is basically a dash (-)] of the ‘Li Clan the First’, he said, “I know this is character ‘yi’, but I don’t know the rest. What does it say, actually?”

“You don’t need to worry about anything,” Bu Tianzhi said, “This ‘yi’ character simply indicates the first page. By the time you leave the ship, I will show it to you again.”

The two boys were getting even more suspicious. But since they still need to learn Ol’ Chen’s great stealing skill, they did not have time to think about it too much; whenever they had spare time, they would practice secretly inside their bedroom.

Five days later after passing through the mouth of Yangtze River, they dropped anchor and tarried over for four days, but the two boys were not allowed to come ashore.

After that they continued northwards. That evening during dinner they found out that Yun Yuzhen has returned, but they did not see Bu Tianzhi.

Yun Yuzhen was in high spirits, it was as if her beauty had spread all over her body and made her glowing. But since Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling already knew that she did not trust them completely [orig. baring her heart into their keeping], they did not see her with the same longing as when they first saw her. Because she was definitely not another Fu Junchuo or even Susu.

“Where are we going, actually?” Kou Zhong asked.

“We are now heading north toward Huai River,” Yun Yuzhen replied, “After that we will head west to Zhongyang. At that time we will plan your mission.”

After sizing them up for half a day, she laughed and said, “I am sure that after two years you will be dignified, handsome and imposing men. Right now after you have your beard shaved, your hair tidied up, you are already a lot more impressive than before. How old are you this year?”

“I just turned eighteen,” Kou Zhong replied, “And he is a year younger.”

Yun Yuzhen cheerfully said, “I heard from Grandpa Chen that you guys managed to master any trick as soon as you learned it; you did not fail to live up to my expectations at all.”

Xu Ziling asked, “If we are successful in stealing the account

book, how are we going to leave the ship?"

"You don't have to worry about that," Yun Yuzhen replied, "I will have my people teach you how to use the light signals to communicate with us. At that time I might personally come to the ship to pick you up. I guarantee it will be foolproof."

Kou Zhong asked, "Dong Ming Pai came to the Central Plains, why would they stay this long?"

Yun Yuzhen replied, "Every three years they would come to the Central Plains for a period of time, to accept new orders and collect payments. As for the delivery of goods, they have other vessels transporting the weapons. This, you don't need to mind."

Xu Ziling asked, "Are there any new developments on the outside world?"

Yun Yuzhen unenthusiastically replied, "Du Fuwei still occupies Liyang unchallenged, several times has he repelled the Sui army. Four months ago Dou Jiande proclaimed himself as the King of Changle, his prestige is actually above Du Fuwei's. Recently several new people emerged; among them is Xu Yuanlang, another one is Lu Mingyue. These two are Wulin characters who hold the balance of power. But in term of sensation, no one surpasses Yingyang Pai's Liang Shidou and Liu Wuzhou who together raised an army against the Sui. Both of them were

originally Sui generals; therefore, their rebellion has significantly weakened the Sui forces.”

She suddenly sighed before continuing, “These two men have close relationship with the Tujue. Liang Shidou recently did obeisance to become a disciple of Tujue’s ‘Wu Zun’ Bi Xuan [see Book 1 Chapter 5] school. With Tujue people’s involvement, I don’t know how this mess is going to be cleaned up.”

The two boys recalled Liang Shidou’s son, Liang Shunming and Shen Tianqun’s beautiful daughter Shen Wushuang; momentarily they were lost in thought.

Xu Ziling was concerned over Susu, he asked about her master, Zhai Rang.

Yun Yuzhen was indeed well-informed of the current situation; she calmly replied, “Zhai Rang and Li Mi are concentrating their forces in preparation to attack Xingluo Warehouse. If they succeed, Sui Clan will be in danger. Speaking about character and prospect, among the militia the Great Dragon Head [or simply ‘Big Boss’] Zhai Rang has the biggest fame and power, but he achieved his fame and power relying on Li Mi. Sooner or later there will be a problem.”

And then she curiously asked, “You seem to also know a little about this aspect?”

“Du Fuwei told us all of these,” Kou Zhong said.

The two boys were worried about Susu, they hurriedly finished their dinner, and went to the Ol’ Chen to continue their training. By the time they returned to their room, it was already the third watch of the night [between 11pm – 1am].

The two boys pretended to lie down on the couch to sleep, but they were talking it over under the bed curtain.

Kou Zhong said, “Our Beautiful Shifu is beautiful on the outside, but the scheming in her heart is not too good. She clearly wants to exploit us to steal something to harm others.”

Xu Ziling said, “She must want to blackmail the Li Clan people just like she blackmail us. We simply must not become her accomplice; we might as well slip away and be done with it.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Do you think I did not want to leave? Problem is, if Beautiful Shifu really wants to treat us cruelly, she would broadcast our whereabouts to the world, so much so that she might make our portraits, and then we certainly won’t be able to move a single step. Therefore, we must come up with a proper escape plan.”

Xu Ziling said, “When we really see Madame Dong Ming, we can

tell her everything, and then beseech her to take us to Ryukyu. It's just that by doing this, we won't be able to avenge Niang."

"And we won't see Li Dage and Susu Jie either," Kou Zhong added.

After being silent for half a day, Kou Zhong said, "Have you noticed that the situation on the ship these days is a bit peculiar?"

Xu Ziling nodded and replied, "Ever since Beautiful Shifu is back, the ship suddenly become very tense, from time to time it changes course as if they are guarding against the enemy."

"I got it!" Kou Zhong slapped his thigh, "Those people might come for us. For example, Haisha Bang, or perhaps our Ol' Die Du Fuwei. You can plant spies in other people's organization, why can't others use the same trick to deal with you?"

Xu Ziling smiled wryly, "What kind of bird trick is that?" he said, "Captured by the Ol' Die or Han Pudi, I'd rather stay here. At least we get polite hospitality."

The know-it-all Kou Zhong said, "Mountain people have brilliant scheme, we'll launch the move 'escaping by death'; we will appear to be killed, but actually we'll escape without a trace."

"It's easier said than done," Xu Ziling dejectedly said, "But how

do you do it?”

Kou Zhong said, “If we are elsewhere, or our skill is as useless as before, naturally it is impossible. But now, as long as we pretend to fall into their trap and fall into the sea, and spurt some blood, and then walk secretly at the bottom of the sea, everybody will think that we are swallowed up by the sea. Won’t we be able to regain our freedom then?”

“Where can we get the blood from?” Xu Ziling asked.

Kou Zhong made a gesture as if he was grabbing something. And then he laughed and said, “Every day we have a large chunk of chicken meat entering our belly, evidently they keep quite a few chicken in the kitchen; you got that?”

Xu Ziling was dismayed, “Problem is we don’t know exactly when the enemy will strike; if we take the blood prematurely, it will coagulate into a hard lump. Supposing that when we fall into the sea and then lumps of chicken blood emerge, won’t the enemy laugh until their big teeth fall off?”

“We can knock the chicken out,” Kou Zhong said, “We are the experts in that kind of trick in stealing chicken. After stealing it, we keep it under our bed. If the enemy has not come yet, we’ll replace the chicken with two others. This will work.”

While Xu Ziling was still hesitating, Kou Zhong sat up and said, “It’s time to test our lightness skill and Ol’ Chen’s stealing technique.”

Book 2 Chapter 11 – As Poisonous As Vipers And Scorpions

Kou Zhong pressed his ear against the wooden door, applied his energy to listen, and after making sure that there was no one in the hallway, he pushed the door and stuck out his head to look, and then darted out.

Xu Ziling followed closely behind. If he said he was not nervous, then he was lying.

The kitchen was located at the aft; hence they had to go through the hallway, going up the stairs, and across a zhang or so of deck, before they could reach the entrance to the galley.

There were two wind lanterns hanging on either end of the hallway, one toward the bow, the other toward the stern; in between these two lanterns, the hallway was dimly lit. At this time of the day, other than the crew on duty, most people were sound asleep.

The two boys channeled their qi to lighten their body; like a ghost they flitted toward the stern. To their shock, as they reached the stairs leading to the deck, they heard voices coming from upstairs. More shocking, it was Yun Yuzhen's tender laughter.

The two boys were so frightened that their soul flew away and scattered; because the distance would not give them enough time to sneak back to their room. In their panic, they did not care which way to take, they pushed the door to the big room where the Ol' Chen imparted his skills, and slipped inside.

Only here they could hide temporarily.

Familiar with the layout of the room, they hid themselves under a cabinet on the corner of the room leaning against the outboard wall, closest to the sea, while praying in their heart that Yun Yuzhen was not out to look for them.

'Squeak!' the workshop door was pushed open. The two boys were happy and scared at the same time.

Happy because obviously Yun Yuzhen came to this level not to look for them, scared because Yun Yuzhen might find them. So the two boys shut their qi while circulating their energy, to move their inner breathing.

If it were other people, even if their inner power were deeper and purer than the two boys', it would still be difficult to hide from a martial art master of Yun Yuzhen's caliber.

But since the 'Secret to Long Life' was the Taoist school's highest cultivation technique, its focus was on maintaining good health in the deepest and most mysterious way. During the energy circulation, the body functioned like animal in hibernation, the breathing became as if it was nonexistent, the essence of qi vanished. Plus Yun Yuzhen was not intentionally trying to find them, hence her senses did not detect the two boys' presence.

At first they only heard Yun Yuzhen's barely audible footsteps, but the two boys sensed that there were two people entering the room, because Yun Yuzhen was already inside the room when they heard the door being closed.

Yun Yuzhen's alluring laughter was heard, "Ce Ge [big brother Ce]! Come in quick! This is Floating Fragrance Flagship model; we lost three martial art experts to obtain this information. How are you going to reward us?" Surprisingly, her voice was extraordinarily foxy, charming, tender, and coy.

And then they heard Yun Yuzhen's soft groan, followed by her panting and the rustling of clothes rubbing against each other.

The two boys felt very embarrassed; they had never expected

that Yun Yuzhen, who ordinarily treated them in cold and inviolable manners, was now sounded like a sex-kitten.

On the other hand, they were greatly terrified, because this man's footsteps did not create any noise at all; apparently his martial art skill was above Yun Yuzhen's.

Then a chipper young voice said, "Yuzhen, you look fuller now. Look! Such a firm and round body."

Gasping for breath, Yun Yuzhen said, "How about you come back after our business is done? Are you afraid I might fly away tonight?"

Hearing this, the two boys' heart was burning with hatred; this Beautiful Shifu's standing in their heart has just taken a thousand zhang drop.

Obviously the man released Yun Yuzhen, since the latter said, "Why haven't you lighted the lantern?"

The lantern was lit. Yun Yuzhen said, "Shan Mei Xianren Madame Dong Ming's [see Book 2 Chapter 5] power has reached perfection; fortunately I knew that in the next seven days she is at Pengcheng [lit. Peng City] to meet Li Yuan. Her return trip will take at least ten days. That will be our only chance to steal the account book."

The man said, “Are those two little demons any good? They still have Dong Ming Pai’s little princess and the law-protector fairies on the ship; all are first-class martial art masters.”

Yun Yuzhen laughed and said, “Those two kids are as smart as ghosts; the only problem is that they did not master Yuzhen’s Crow Crossing Technique; otherwise, with intention can be considered without intention. This matter will be ninety percent sure. At that time, I might pretend to attack the Floating Fragrance Flagship, to lure their martial art experts out, so that they can make their escape. There shouldn’t be any problem.”

The man laughed and said, “Each time you, this coquettish fox, mention those two kids, you always have your brows raised in delight and your eyes laughing. Are you thinking of tasting their virginity?”

Yun Yuzhen laughed and swore, “With you, this big-headed ghost, would I look at those two little ruffians whose smell of mother’s milk has not dried yet? It’s just that they can still be considered rising star [the original was ‘darker’: delight of a girl trafficked into a brothel to work as prostitute]. Because the matter this time is of grave importance, we had to ask you, the new generation martial art expert of the Dugu Clan, to come and personally receive the goods. At that time we can easily kill them to shut their mouth. Others are making an all-out effort for your sake, but unexpectedly you said such thing about others. Ah ... oh

...”

The two people were making out again.

But to Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, it was as if they heard thunder from a clear blue sky, their heart was completely broken; turned out the truth was this cruel. All those sweet speech and honeyed words from Yun Yuzhen were nothing but lies.

At the same time they suddenly saw the light.

Jukun Bang's backing was actually one of the four powerful clans, the Dugu Clan. Plus this matter was actually Dugu Clan's plot against the Li Clan or perhaps the Yuwen Clan.

Then they heard Yun Yuzhen's voice; moaning and gasping for breath she said, “Do you want me to go back to my room? Do you really want to tease me to death? These two nights should be peaceful and safe, but as soon as we enter Huai River, I can't guarantee anything. I don't know how Du Fuwei got wind that the two little demons are on my ship. At that time, I will have to rely on your, Dugu Ce's 'Bi Luo Jianfa' [sky-blue fall sword] to deal with his 'Xiu Li Qiankun' [universe in his sleeve].”

“Don't worry!” Dugu Ce arrogantly said, “Er Ge [second (older) brother] has personally prepared martial art masters to provide support to us; we can easily slaughter Du Fuwei. At that time only

Fu Gongyou left with Huai River army; not enough for us to fear.”

Yun Yuzhen said, “When your Dugu Clan obtain the world [tian xia] in the future, don’t forget me, Yun Yuzhen!”

Dugu Ce lowered his voice, “Are you sure that those two kids really don’t know the secret of Duke Yang’s treasure trove?”

“I am sure,” Yun Yuzhen replied, “Once I intentionally mocked them that they did not the treasure’s location, while I paid close attention to their reaction and facial expression. I knew that Fu Junchuo did not tell them. The fact is, Fu Junchuo has always been Gaoli people, how could she possibly spill the secret to Han people? Come!”

The door closed. The sound of footsteps moved farther and farther away. The two boys breathed a sigh of relief, but still felt extremely lost.

Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling’s ear, “There will come a day we will vent our anger to her.”

Xu Ziling said wryly, “Looks like it won’t be too late for us to steal chicken when we get to Huai River.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Let’s go back to bed!”

That night they did not sleep well. When dawn came, they woke up and went to the deck to enjoy the ocean view, and their mood improved a little bit.

A flock of seagulls hovered behind the ship; the two boys watched with rapt attention how the seagulls flew in arcs; a comprehension grew in their mind, momentarily they had their eyes only on the seagulls and forgot about everything else.

Suddenly Yun Yuzhen's voice came from behind, "Why woke up so early today?" she asked.

The two boys intentionally did not turn their head around, Kou Zhong only mumbled incoherently in reply.

Yun Yuzhen stood next to Xu Ziling. "Haven't you seen seagulls before?" she asked in astonishment, "Why are you so enthralled?"

Xu Ziling gave her an indifferent look; recalling that last night she said it with her own mouth that she wanted Dugu Ce to kill them to shut their mouth, and that he has finally seen her salacious nature, a sense of loathing bubbled up in his heart. Turning his gaze back to the seagulls, he said in heavy tone, "Naturally seagulls are a lot more enthralling; at least live a carefree live, without any fear of being harmed by their own kind."

Kou Zhong was afraid Yun Yuzhen might grow suspicious, he laughed and said, “Xiao Ling has always been a helpless romantic. Beautiful Shifu must not blame him.”

How could Yun Yuzhen know that the two boys have discovered her secret? With a charming smile she said, “Young people always have their minds filled with fantasy. Just enjoy the view for a moment longer, and then come down to have breakfast with me! I will tell you more on the details of your mission.” Finished speaking, she gracefully left.

Three days later, the ship finally reached the water where Huai River met the ocean, where they turn west to travel along Huai River.

The people on the ship grew tense again. Yun Yuzhen even issued a strict order for the two boys to stay inside their room at all times.

That evening, while other people were focusing their attention to the enemy outside, Kou Zhong sneaked into the galley to steal three chickens and brought them back into their room, where they waited patiently.

The two boys were fully dressed, with their weapons tied behind their back; and then they separately stationed themselves

by the window and by the door to listen to the activity outside.

By the third watch of the night [between 11pm – 1am] there was sound of footsteps in the hallway, coming straight toward their room. Horrified, the two boys jumped onto the bed, pretending to be asleep.

There was a knock on the door, followed by the door being pushed open. Yun Zhi's voice was heard, "Get dressed quickly, I'll come back to take you out later."

Without waiting for any response, she closed the door.

The two boys jumped out of the bed in fear. They hastily slaughtered the chicken and collected their blood, which they put into four empty stolen wine bottles, and divided the bottles into two halves. When they were just hiding the bottles into their pockets, Yun Zhi returned. She beckoned them to follow her.

Right that moment the hull suddenly shook violently, the ship was making a hard turn, and sailed in high speed back to where they were coming from.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling concluded that not only the enemy has come, they were coming in full force and posed a real threat to Jukun Bang, putting them in a rather difficult situation. Only the two boys did not know what went wrong.

The hallway was full of people going back and forth, there were a lot of people that they had never seen before but now making their appearance. They all seemed to be very tense, just like the tension before a giant storm.

Kou Zhong quickened his steps to ask Yun Zhi, “Who’s coming?”

Yun Zhi lost her usual composure; rudely and impatiently she said, “Don’t talk!”

Kou Zhong fell back to Xu Ziling and said in a low voice, “Little ruffian will always be little ruffian.”

Naturally Xu Ziling understood what he meant. If it were not they accidentally came across the ‘Secret to Long Life’ and the ‘Duke Yang’s treasure-trove’, Jianghu people would definitely look down on them and dismiss them as nobodies.

With her grand prestige as the trusted maid of the clan leader, naturally Yun Zhi would never regard them as anybody important; simply because she received Yun Yuzhen’s order that she treated the two boys with fake respect and addressed them as Gongzi this and Gongzi that. Now that they encountered emergency situation like this, her patience was gone.

Yun Zhi led them to the main deck. The two boys took the

opportunity to look around. They saw five big ships about two li upstream, coming toward them at an amazingly high speed.

The deck was full of Jukun Bang warriors; everybody looked tensed and alert, ready to fight the enemy.

Yun Zhi kept walking toward the bow, where about twenty people gathered, including Yun Yuzhen and the deputy clan leader Bu Tianzhi, whom they have not seen for a long time.

The other people looked different from each other; about seven or eight were women, each one was as beautiful as a flower. When they saw the two boys, their beautiful eyes were shining with curiosity.

Although the deck was in total blackout, the two boys were not in the least bit bothered by it.

Standing next to Yun Yuzhen was a man who looked to be at the same height as Kou Zhong, approximately twenty-five or twenty-six years old. His face handsome, his bearings serious, his clothes was a tight-fitting warrior suit. He and Yun Yuzhen looked to be a perfect match. It's just that his face was even more gaunt than Xu Ziling, plus there was a hint of paleness from excessive drinking and womanizing, so that he could not be compared to Xu Ziling in terms of natural elegance; however, he did have the maturity that Xu Ziling lacked.

If this man was indeed Dugu Ce, then in terms of status and martial art skill, this man far surpassed the two boys.

Yun Yuzhen stepped forward to meet them and said, "The enemy is too strong, we must immediately escape to the shore."

Bu Tianzhi and that man, whom they suspected was Dugu Ce, also came to either side of Yun Yuzhen. The latter was staring at the two boys, sizing them up.

Kou Zhong pretended to be surprised as he stared back at Dugu Ce curiously.

Yun Yuzhen cleared her throat and made the introduction, "This is our Gang's martial art master protector of the law. He and Bu Fu Bangzhu will personally protect you."

Dugu Ce laughed and said, "Two Xiao Xiongdi need not be scared; leaving the ship is just a tactical matter, not that we are afraid of the enemy."

As soon as he spoke, the two boys recognized his voice; he was indeed Dugu Ce.

"Who's the enemy?" Xu Ziling asked.

Yun Yuzhen replied, “Du Fuwei has just taken the two large towns along the river ahead; he blocks the route to Zhongyang, hence we must change our route and go different way.”

Kou Zhong smiled politely to Yun Zhi, who was standing to the side, “Look!” he said, “Bangzhu treated us with a lot more courtesy than you did.”

Yun Zhi glowered at him for a moment, but then she hung her head and did not dare to say anything.

Yun Yuzhen also glowered at Yun Zhi, but right that moment someone came to report, “Bangzhu! We will reach Leigong [lit. god of thunder] Gorge soon.”

The two boys looked ahead, and saw the river narrowed, both banks were high and steep cliffs; the terrain looks extremely dangerous.

“Prepare to abandon ship!” Yun Yuzhen ordered.

The twenty-something people moved toward the port side of the bow. Bu Tianzhi and Dugu Ce separately came to Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong’s sides, and pulled their shoulders toward the edge of the ship.

Meanwhile, the enemy ships were closing in behind them that

they were now only about a li away.

Jukun Bang's warship was steered toward the left bank. When they were only about three zhang away from the cliff, the twenty odd people soared to the sky across the Huai River, flying toward a dangerous cliff nearby.

Bu Tianzhi and Dugu Ce wrapped their arms around the two boys' waist, and then took them soaring into the air, and landed at the bank.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling did a self-check: if they had to exert their strength and jump across three zhang distance, it would still be beyond their reach. But now everybody, including Yun Zhi, was able to easily do it. Based on this fact alone they knew that these people, at least in term of qinggong, was much better than they.

Holding them in their arms, Bu Tianzhi and Dugu Ce were still able to 'handle the butcher's cleaver with ease'; it was obvious that the two boys could only 'see the other rider's dust and have no hope of catching up'. [Translator's note: I could very well translate this paragraph as: Holding them in their arms, Bu Tianzhi and Dugu Ce were still able to do it skillfully and easily; it was obvious that the two boys were far inferior. But to me, personally, Chinese idioms are fascinating, and I'd like to share it with you.]

Therefore, under normal circumstances, they basically had no hope of escaping.

After landing, Yun Yuzhen did not just stay there; they quickly ran into the depth of the mountain and fields.

After running for a time needed to burn an incense stick, Dugu Ce suddenly shouted, “Halt!”

Everybody halted in shock.

A moment later, they heard the sound of bird cry and the flapping of wings ahead; obviously the enemy is coming their way, startling the sleeping birds away.

Aghast, Yun Yuzhen said, “This way!” Taking the lead, she dashed to the right.

After rushing down a hill, they saw ahead was a big mountain. Unleashing their lightness skill, everybody ran up the mountain at full speed.

By this time the sky was gradually getting brighter; all around them was desolate forest and mountainous open space that has never seen human footprint.

Passing through a thick forest, suddenly they were greeted by

vast open space with wide panorama; turned out they had come to the edge of a high cliff. Directly across the canyon, peaks of a mountain range still loomed at the distance that they were all horrified.

Still holding Kou Zhong under his arm, Dugu Ce walked over to the edge of the cliff and looked down. “This is a dead end!” he exclaimed.

Kou Zhong craned his neck, he saw the cliff was around a hundred zhang tall, but clusters of old trees sprouted along the wall of the cliff, easing the feeling of danger. Down below was an endless stretch of jungle that extended toward the sloping hill on the opposite side.

Yun Yuzhen was trying to find a way down when suddenly there was a long laugh coming from behind them. “Hongfen Bangzhu [orig. rouge and powder, see Book 2 Chapter 8], please hold! Du Fuwei of Huai River pays his respect to Bangzhu.”

Everybody knew hard battle was inevitable; they halted their steps and drew their weapons.

Bu Tianzhi and Dugu Ce put the two boys down and stood in front of them to shield them.

In order to deal with the powerful enemy, Yun Yuzhen and the

rest stood in a semi-circle battle formation to protect them as well. Behind them was precisely the high cliff that could have their body torn and their bones crushed.

Kou Zhong reached out to grab Xu Ziling's hand; taking advantage while Yun Yuzhen and the others had their attention fixed on the enemy and did not pay any attention to the two boys, he whispered into Xu Ziling's ear, "We'll wait for an appropriate time to jump down the cliff. The cliff wall is full of trees and bushes, which will reduce the momentum of our falling. The bottom of the cliff is a forest, I guarantee we won't die from falling."

Xu Ziling clenched his teeth and nodded his head.

Meanwhile Du Fuwei's tall and lanky figure has appeared ahead, and stopped about a zhang away in front of Yun Yuzhen and the others. Farther down, at the edge of the hill, there were thirty, forty people came out and immediately surround them.

Du Fuwei still wore tall hat on his head, his vigor was still as before, his gaze fell to the two boys, unexpectedly, a smiling expression, which was very difficult to describe, appeared on his dead-man-like face. He said in tender voice, "Children, now that you see your father, why haven't you come over to pay your respect and admit your wrong?"

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “Die, how are you, Senior? Your children have betrayed our family clan, henceforth father and sons relationship is cut asunder. Die, you’d better go home to enjoy live of ease and comfort, don’t go around tiring yourself for the sake of your children.”

Seeing Kou Zhong was not the least bit afraid of the notoriously cruel and merciless Du Fuwei, Yun Yuzhen could not help feeling greatly amazed. If it were they, due to Du Fuwei’s reputation, they would not dare to speak thoughtlessly and thus offending him.

What she did not know was that Du Fuwei was accustomed to listening to Kou Zhong, hence he still had a familiar feeling in his heart; smiling, he said, “It was caused by lack of communication between us, father and sons. Let your Ol’ Die get rid of these brazen, mad fellows who kidnap people first, and then we, father and sons can sit down and have a nice heart-to-heart chat!”

Dugu Ce and Yun Yuzhen let out a cold snort at the same time.

Du Fuwei acted if he did not even see them. His gaze swept across the several women in the group; he laughed and said, “I often heard Jukun Bang is accustomed to use women to confuse people. Sure enough it is true. This time I, Du Fuwei, come prepared. If fighting breaks, I am afraid not many people will escape alive. The men will unavoidably die on the spot; the

women will be difficult to escape humiliation. Does Yun Bangzhu still want to insist?”

With a cold humph Dugu Ce said, “People said that Du Fuwei is so arrogant that no one else matters. Sure enough it is true. Who’s strong and who’s weak, we’ll find out as soon as we fight; why talk too much?”

Du Fuwei’s gaze fell on Dugu Ce’s face; his eyes emitted a very cold and sharp ray. “May I know this young friend’s respected surname and great given name?” he asked in icy-cold tone, “Your tone is bigger than Yun Bangzhu’s!”

With a charming laugh Yun Yuzhen said, “Have Du Zongguan heard Yuzhen speaks? How do you know who has the bigger tone?”

Du Fuwei shook his head; he said, “I only know that in these circumstances he can still talk out of turn, I know he is not your subordinate; why would Yun Bangzhu still want to cover him up?”

Yun Yuzhen was dumbstruck and unable to reply.

Du Fuwei nonchalantly said, “Jukun Bang and I have always been without grievance without enmity. I am just trying to get back two naughty children whose inferior character is hard to change. Fighting always damages a good relationship, but if we

don't fight, it will be difficult to convince you. How about this! I have a proposal, I wonder if ladies and gentlemen are willing to listen."

Yun Yuzhen coldly replied, "This Bangzhu will listen with respectful attention."

At this time, even Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling knew that Du Fuwei has completely seized the initiative, while Yun Yuzhen's side could only play along.

Although earlier Dugu Ce did not consider Du Fuwei's prestige to be worthy in his eyes, but when he actually met Du Fuwei, it was like the hero suddenly turned into a coward [play on words here: hero – yingxiong, coward – gouxiong (lit. black bear)]; his nastiness disappeared who knows where.

Du Fuwei pointed to Dugu Ce and said, "Let this mysterious friend have an all-out battle with the Ol' Du for ten moves. Supposing I cannot achieve victory, I will immediately turn on my heels and will no longer consider these two inferior kids even exist. But supposing by fluke the Ol' Du wins, Yun Bangzhu will immediately hand them over to me so that I could bring them home and give them a good discipline. Yun Bangzhu, what's your opinion?"

And then he added in an icy-cold tone, "If Yun Bangzhu does

not agree, my party will go all-out against yours. When that happens, please don't blame Ol' Du of being vicious and merciless, and totally disregarding Jianghu's principle of giving you a face."

Yun Yuzhen's heart shivered in fear; she realized Du Fuwei's vision was indeed brilliant. He had seen through that in her side, Dugu Ce possessed the most superior martial art skill, yet he still dared to challenge him for ten moves; thus it was clear how high the opponent's confidence in achieving victory.

All of a sudden, she came to a realization that she had fallen into absolute disadvantage, and that she had no other choice.

Book 2 Chapter 12 – Faking Death To Escape

Although Dugu Ce was conceited, yet he admired Du Fuwei's prestige.

If he could not even take ten moves from Du Fuwei, it could be said that his side would definitely lose. Therefore, this proposal was definitely beneficial to them.

However, he was also aware that Du Fuwei was afraid they would destroy indiscriminately [orig. burn both jade and ordinary stone] and kill the two boys first. If that happened, even if Du Fuwei killed them all, he would still fail to achieve his goal.

After exchanging several glances with Yun Yuzhen, he stepped out of the formation, cupped his fist and said, "Du Zongguan, please."

Because nowadays Du Fuwei considered himself the Zongguan [chief manager, see Book 1 Chapter 1] of Liyang, everybody called him Du Zongguan.

Du Fuwei still had his hands behind his back; he smiled and said, “The number of people in Jianghu who wield sword is beyond counting, but those who really know how to use sword can be counted with my fingers; the most notable being the Dugu and Song, two powerful clans. Right now Song Clan is too busy dealing with the muddle-headed ruler. If I am not mistaken, concealed within Xiongtai’s [brother, polite appellation for someone of similar age] footsteps is lightness skill from superb school, which originated from Dugu Clan’s top ranking consummate skill, ‘Bi Luo Hongzhen’ [sky-blue falling word of mortals]. Is Ol’ Du mistaken?”

Everybody from Yun Yuzhen’s side was shaken; nobody expected that Du Fuwei’s vision was this brilliant.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were cheering in their heart; they really wish their Ol’ Dad would give this ‘vile’ Dugu Ce a hard lesson, while dealing a heavy setback to Yun Yuzhen as well.

Dugu Ce calmly replied, “Senior’s eyesight is indeed brilliant, Junior is precisely Dugu Ce, who rely on several moves based on my father Dugu Feng’s direction. Would Senior please enlighten me?”

Du Fuwei laughed aloud and said, “Turns out it is indeed an old friend’s descendant. I wonder if Laotaitai’s [elderly lady] asthma is getting better?”

An angry look flashed across Dugu Ce's handsome face; he responded, "Laonainai [(paternal) great-grandmother, but in this case I think it is simply 'old (paternal) grandmother'] is well. Thank you very much for Du Zongguan's concern."

Actually, although the leader of Dugu Clan was Dugu Ce's father, Dugu Feng, speaking about martial art skill, it was Dugu Feng's mother, You Chuhong, who held the first place [orig. sitting steadily on number one chair].

You Chuhong was nearly a hundred years old. At the age of sixty she abandoned the sword and used a staff instead. During the creation of the 'Pifeng Zhang Fa' [Cloak/cape Staff Technique], she nearly suffered fire deviation. Although luckily she was able to save herself in time, the after effect remained; from time to time it flared up in asthma-like symptoms. That was the reason of Du Fuwei's question.

Du Fuwei's intention was to infuriate Dugu Ce; having achieved his purpose, he roared, "I want to see if there is anything new in Dugu Family's 'Bi Luo Hongzhen'."

Both sides were holding their breath in silence, waiting for Dugu Ce to make his move.

'Ring!' the sword left its scabbard.

Dugu Ce held the sword horizontally across his chest, He stood motionless, yet his imposing aura was suffocating. It was indeed the demeanor of a famous house.

Kou Zhong, who was standing at the edge of the cliff, whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "The opportunity to learn has come!"

Xu Ziling nodded excitedly.

The one thing they lacked the most was real combat experience. If they could watch martial art experts poised for battle, it would definitely bring great benefits to them.

Dugu Ce coldly shouted, "Pardon my offense!" as he swiftly stepped forward and moved his sword to attack. A dense cold air immediately filled the air.

They saw layer upon layer of sword shadows rushing forth in front of his chest, the moves were tricky, strange and tight, it appeared to attack, but seemed to defend, so that the opponent was completely unable to estimate.

Du Fuwei showed a grim expression. With a feign sway, he suddenly moved to Dugu Ce's left side. Dugu Ce's body followed the movement of his sword. He let out a muffled shout, thousands of sword tips rushed forth like raging tide or gigantic wave toward Du Fuwei. Unexpectedly it was an offense without

any regard of self-defense.

Du Fuwei laughed aloud, his right hand sleeve flew out. 'Bang!' it swept around the perimeter of the shadow of swords. Qi and sword force collided, emitting another muffled-thunder-like noise, making those to hear it to feel as if they were assaulted by a shockwave.

Dugu Ce was jolted back half a step as if he was struck by a lightning bolt. Both of Du Fuwei's sleeves flew together, seizing the opportunity to pursue and attack, while his body flashed toward the other side to launch another attack; he was as fast as a ghost.

Now everybody knew that Dugu Ce's internal energy was inferior to Du Fuwei; but nobody could tell whether he would or he would not be able to take ten moves. Besides, the 'universe' inside Du Fuwei's sleeves have yet played their part.

Dugu Ce's treasured sword swiftly slashed up from the lower part of his side toward Du Fuwei's face, totally ignoring the opponent's two sleeves. It was another both-side-suffer move.

Watching the fight, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling gained tacit understanding; they completely grasped the concept of Dugu Ce's sword technique and strategy.

It must be noted that with his status as the Senior [qian bei, older generation], if he was injured by a younger generation, even if he was able to kill the opponent, it would be hard for him to claim shameless victory. But under the opponent's relentless offense without any regard of defense like this, to gain victory without being hurt under ten moves was certainly easier said than done.

Seeing how Dugu Ce had full control of his sword's position and was able to change according to the situation, and how he was able to distribute his power evenly, and thus showing his profound mastery, Du Fuwei exclaimed, "Good!"

His sleeves suddenly folded up to clamp the sword blade on both sides; in an instant he has grasped the initiative, rendering the opponent unable to continue his strike. Dugu Ce's incomparably fast and fierce sword was suddenly unable to advance even a cun.

Dugu Ce knew the situation was bad. Just as he was thinking of pulling his sword in abrupt retreat, Du Fuwei's right hand, which was still hidden inside his sleeve, suddenly flicked the tip of his sword. Dugu Ce felt as if the pit of his stomach was struck by lightning, he nearly vomited blood. Fortunately he had trained first-class internal energy cultivation since childhood, his foundation was very strong; swiftly he channeled his true qi to disperse the opponent's force with difficulty. But in the process he was jolted two steps back; one step and a half farther than the

previous setback.

Yun Yuzhen and the others were all shocked; their countenance paled.

The arm guards inside Du Fuwei's sleeves have not been used, Dugu Ce already fell into a disadvantageous position; how could the battle continue?

To their surprise, however, Du Fuwei did not continue with 'pursue and attack'; he put his hands behind his back again and said with a cold laugh, "If Dugu Feng himself were here, he might have a chance in an all-out battle with me, but you, noble nephew, fall far too short. There are still eight moves left. If noble nephew is trying to be brave and continue fighting, Ol' Du can guarantee that you will find it difficult to guarantee your life. Noble nephew better think it over three times."

Dugu Ce's chest was heaving up and down incessantly, the color on his handsome face alternated between red and white. Now he knew that there is no famous reputation with empty skill. Du Fuwei has been moving across the land under the heavens unhindered for the last several decades; he was on par with top martial art masters of the four powerful clans, as well as other experts such as Zhai Rang, Li Mi, Dou Jiande, Wang Bo, and the like. He had real skill and definitely did not enjoy false reputation. However, if Dugu Ce had to concede at this point, he simply could

not accept it, no matter what.

Yun Yuzhen's face was devoid of any color; she hurried forward and saluted, "Junior accepts your advice. Du Zongguan may take the two boys away, On behalf of Jukun Bang, Yuzhen assures you that we won't interfere in this matter anymore."

Du Fuwei remained impassive; turning his gaze toward Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, two people, he said in soft voice, "Children! Let's go home!"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling burst into loud laughter together; their laughter carried a heroic feeling.

Xu Ziling loudly cried out, "Heroes can be killed but never humiliated. How could we, the Two Dragons of Yangzhou, be traded back and forth like merchandise?"

With an air of righteousness, Kou Zhong also said, "Die! Please forgive your sons for not being filial."

"Don't!" Yun Yuzhen and Du Fuwei shouted together.

The two boys did not hesitate at all. Just as Yun Yuzhen and Du Fuwei rushed forward, they jumped over the cliff.

Yun Yuzhen and Du Fuwei reached out trying to catch them, but

both grabbed empty air. They saw the two boys' figure rapidly getting smaller and smaller. Judging from the speed and the momentum with which the two boys were falling, they knew that these boys did not know qinggong. In fact, the posture as the boys fell was poles apart from conventional qinggong that Yun Yuzhen and Du Fuwei knew; naturally they could not grasp the truth of the matter.

'Splash!' Holding each other's hand, the two boys fell through and broke the branch of an old tree extended from the cliff wall. Branches and leaves split up and closed down after them, and they disappeared from Du and Yun, two people's line of sight.

Du Fuwei looked up to heaven and let out a sorrowful roar, revealing regret and grief so deep that other people found it hard to express or explain!

Yun Yuzhen was as dumb as a wooden chicken; she stared blankly toward the bottom of the cliff, while grieving silently. She thought that if she did not try to exploit them, right now the two boys would still live and play happily at that quiet beach. It was only then did she realize that she actually had some feelings toward them.

Du Fuwei suddenly turned his body around, as if he could not bear to look down anymore. "All of you must accompany them in death!" he coldly hissed.

Yun Yuzhen came to her senses; she quickly stepped back into her troop formation.

The men on Du Fuwei's side swarmed in, forcing them toward the edge of the cliff.

Suddenly from the bottom of the cliff came the sound of howling wolves. Du Fuwei's countenance changed as he said, "Forget it! Get lost!"

Finished speaking, he jumped onto the edge of the cliff to look down.

At this moment Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had successfully landed in the jungle; without fighting, the four bottles of chicken blood broke, splashing chicken blood everywhere, some brushed onto the branches and leaves, some fell into the bushes.

The two boys cried out for their Niang in pain, but they knew it was a critical moment. Crawling and rolling, they randomly picked a direction to take and madly rushed toward that direction, creating a strip of 'bloody path'. Even when their weapons, money purse, and everything else fell from their pockets, they did not have time to pick it up.

Since they fell down but did not die, naturally other people could also go down and see if they were dead or alive.

Suddenly there was a loud howl of a wolf; the two boys lost their soul and dropped their spirit. They scuttled away and used the Bird Crossing Technique to jump onto a tree.

Several hungry and very fierce wolves appeared, ferociously sniffing the chicken blood on the ground. Kou Zhong cried out and jumped onto another tree. Xu Ziling followed behind. Shortly afterward they have gone quite far.

In the meantime, Du Fuwei has arrived at the bottom of the cliff. Seeing several dozens wolves chasing and beating around the bloodstained bushes, his anger flared. He pounced forward and grabbed some hapless hungry wolves.

This could also be considered the two boys' good luck. If not for this flock of ravenous wolves fighting with each other over the bloodstain attracting Du Fuwei's attention, the noise the two boys made as they were running away would surely fail to escape the ears of this top martial art master of the Wulin world.

By nightfall, the two boys have covered over fifty li, and were extremely exhausted. When they found a clear creek nearby, they washed their chicken-blood stained clothes.

As the moon rose, the two boys immersed themselves in the creek, and could not help thinking about the good old days when

they met Fu Junchuo for the first time; it was so surreal that they thought it was a dream.

“What is this place?” Xu Ziling asked.

Kou Zhong thought for a moment before replying, “We were traveling west along Huai River, and then turned around and disembarked on the northern bank. Right now we ought to be between Pengcheng and Donghai, two counties. Ha! Did you remember that Yun woman [poniang (derogatory)] said that these days Shanmei Xianren Madame Dong Ming might come to Pengcheng to see Li Yuan, the Clan Leader of the Li Clan? If you want to marry beautiful Dong Ming little princess, we should go to Pengcheng.”

Because this kid had his heart filled with lofty aspirations, he made a serious effort in studying Central Plains’ geography.

Xu Ziling dove into the bottom of the creek. It was quite a while before his head emerged above the water. “”You haven’t had enough?” he said, “Right now everybody thinks we are dead, wouldn’t it be better to go to Old Zhai’s residence first to find Su Jie, and see if Li Dage condition is better?”

Kou Zhong sneered and said, “You, this kid, really don’t have aspiration; aren’t we going to avenge Niang? If we go find Yuwen Huagu openly right now, we will only incur laughter from his foul

mouth. But mountain people have wonderful idea to kill Yuwen Huagu.” [This is the second time he called himself ‘mountain people’. Must be a slang of some sort.]

“What wonderful idea?” Xu Ziling wondered.

The all-knowing Kou Zhong replied, “Naturally that account book. Perhaps Yuwen Clan also placed an order for weapons from Dong Ming Pai, with intention to rebel. Otherwise, he would not order Haisha Bang to attack Floating Fragrance Flagship. Isn’t it clear that he wanted to destroy the evidence that he is going to revolt?”

Xu Ziling’s eyes immediately lit up.

Kou Zhong lowered his voice, “Come! Let’s have a competition.”

Xu Ziling was stunned, “Competing in what?” he asked.

Kou Zhong replied, “Competing who get to wear our wet clothes first, and then competing whose qinggong is a bit better, by deciding who’s going to step into Pengcheng first.”

The two boys looked at each other, and then with a scream they scrambled toward their wet clothes by the creek.

With many twists and turns, these good friends who were closer than brothers, finally gain their freedom back. Once again they set their foot in another stage of life's journey.

Book 3 Chapter 1 – People In Terrible Situation

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling put on their tattered and wet clothes, and ran over the mountain and fields, giggling and laughing, heading toward the direction of what they guessed to be Pengcheng.

Right now they did not have a single wen, even their weapons were gone, nevertheless, in their heart they were exceedingly cheerful; there was a joyful feeling that ‘the whole sea and sky were wide open for me to crisscross’.

The more they ran, the more the joy in their heart grew.

Although they often felt that the breathing from their mouth and nose could not keep up, their inner breathing was circulating endlessly.

Kou Zhong jumped onto a boulder. From its top he soared high into the air and made a flip as he descended onto the slope below.

Unfortunately his footing was unstable, he fumbled three, four zhang down the slope into a clump of underbrush at the bottom of the hill. This time even his left sleeve was caught by the twigs and tore, exposing his thick and solid arm.

In his playful spirit Xu Ziling wanted to suffer the same fate, so he also rolled down and crashed onto Kou Zhong. Holding their head in their hands, the two boys laughed heartily. In their delight they forgot their appearance.

“Ah!” Kou Zhong suddenly exclaimed; pointing to the far away sky he said, “What is that?”

Xu Ziling raised his head and looked; seeing bright and flashing red light, he said in horror, “Fire!”

Kou Zhong sprang up and said, “Let’s go and see!”

It was a burned down small town. All the houses have burned through the roof. Inside and outside the town was full of human and animal bodies scattered around. Some have turned into barely recognizable charred remains.

The houses were still burning, creating crackling noise and emitting unceasing stream of thick black smoke. Apart from that, this supposedly lively and prosperous market town had become a deathly still ghost town. The survivors must have fled far away.

Some of the corpses still had dried bloodstains. Unexpectedly the murders did not distinguish men, women, young and old; everybody was massacred cruelly.

Looking at all these, the two boys' eyes were brimming with hot tears, but their hearts were as cold as ice.

Could it be that Du Fuwei's men committed such atrocity? Why did they commit this kind of worse-than-a-beast action?

From the west of town they heard faint noise of carriages, horses and men. But the noise was moving away. The two boys clenched their teeth and madly chased away.

Passing through a thick wooded area, the two boys were stunned. They saw along the official road heading north a large number of Sui troops. Their body armor and helmet were in disarray, their banner askew; evidently these were retreating defeated troops.

Falling behind at the end of the line were countless mule carts. Due to the load they carried, they lagged some distance away from the troops' main body, just like an old man struggling and trudging along this section of the road.

The two boys were bewildered and were just wondering if it

was this group of defeated soldiers who committed the heinous crime when suddenly from a mule cart near the end of the line they heard a man's malicious laughter, followed by a naked woman, whose body was covered in blood, was thrown out of the cart. 'Bang!' the woman landed on the muddy road, motionless. Obviously she was dead.

The Sui troop driving the cart laughed heartily and said, "Lao Zhang [ole Zhang], you are all right. That was the third."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were burning with anger. They could not hold it anymore and ran madly after the cart.

The thief soldier, who had just raped and murdered an innocent woman, lifted himself up from the cart; suddenly seeing the two boys, he drew his saber and with a loud laugh said, "D@mn survivor [orig. dead leftover], was it your Niang that I just f*ck?"

Righteous indignation filled the two boys' heart; without even remembering that they had no weapons, they flew toward the Sui soldier.

Seeing the two boys know martial art, the Sui soldier jumped in fright; he cried out to the driver to turn around and help him, while at the same time he swept his saber horizontally to prevent the two boys from landing on the cart.

Kou Zhong was about to take him head-on, but then he suddenly realized that he had no weapon in his hand. Without even thinking he sent out a mouthful of true qi, unexpectedly, for the first time ever, while he was still midair, his body rose and the enemy's saber missed by a hairbreadth. With great difficulty he somersaulted over the enemy's head.

In front, the Sui soldier driving the cart raised his lance and thrust it toward Kou Zhong's chest. It happened right when Kou Zhong, who was still midair, suddenly realized that he had made a breakthrough; his heart was shaken, he abruptly sucked a mouthful of 'physical qi', hence his true qi became disturbed, he landed heavily on the sacks of grain, the cargo of the mule cart, and thus escaped the enemy's lance.

In the meantime, Xu Ziling's right foot had just landed on the railing of the mule cart. Seeing the saber swept, using this foot as the axis he hastily revolved his body around and fast as lightning his left foot kicked the enemy's left ear.

Both his qi and strength were transmitted via the foot, the result was so brutal that the Sui soldier did not even have time to cry out when his neck bone was broken while his body was thrown behind the cart and he died on the spot.

It was the very first time that Xu Ziling ever killed anybody. Horrified, his true qi was disturbed and he also fell on the pile of

grains.

Kou Zhong had just raised his hand to grab the incoming lance; clutching the enemy's lance, he sent out his strength to pull hard. Unable to hold his footing steady, the Sui soldier, the driver of the cart, slipped between the driver seat and the cart. Immediately a shrill, blood-curling screech was heard.

By this time the Sui soldiers at the front of the line already knew something was happening. A dozen or so riders turned around to charge.

“Let's go!” Kou Zhong shouted. The two boys hastily jumped off the cart; like a wisp of smoke they darted into the dense forest and disappeared without a trace.

The two boys ran for more than ten li at a stretch, before they finally sat down to rest. Xu Ziling sighed and said, “I just killed a man! How would I know that with one kick I sent him to his death?”

Kou Zhong wrapped his arm around Xu Ziling's shoulder and said, “Death of those people who murdered, burned and raped innocent people need not be begrudged; don't let your heart be troubled.”

After a short pause, he continued, “Those dog soldiers in

Yangzhou, if they don't go on the rampage with total disregard of the law, then they bully innocent citizens; I just did not expect that murder and arson are also their masterpiece. No wonder so many people rise in rebellion. Compared to last time, our Ol' Die's men can be considered not too bad. Hey! Did you hear that?"

Xu Ziling focused his attention to listen carefully; sure enough there was a faint sound of battle carried by the wind. The sound seemed to come from a very wide area, as if two very large troops were fighting each other in life and death battle.

Remembering the town people who were massacred by the Sui army, their heart was burning with anger as they sprang up at once.

Kou Zhong said in deep regret, "If I had known earlier, I would have seized that lance, so that we could stake our lives against those dog soldiers."

A murderous aura bubbled up in Xu Ziling's heart; expressing his agreement he said, "We can go to look at the situation first, won't seizing two sabers be easy then? After all, what we lack the most is battle experience. Let those thief soldiers, who are worse than a beast, have a taste of our saber."

The two boys have just had a small test of their skill with remarkable result, so now their confidence was at its peak.

Kou Zhong nodded and said, "It seems that we now have some real skill, it's just that we don't have a chance for more practice. Xiongdi, come! Today is our first day of crisscrossing the Jianghu unhindered."

Screaming with joy, they rushed toward the sound of battle.

After swimming across a stream, they unleashed their lightness skill. Going over a small hill, they went straight up the slope. Upon reaching the top, a wide clearing suddenly appeared before their eyes.

They saw on the plains below two armies were engaged in fierce battle. One side wore the uniform of Sui army, approximately ten thousand men strong; the other side wore one-color dark green plain clothes. Their number was only about one-fourth of the Sui army, but every single one's martial art skill was not weak, their formation was still intact. As they charged toward the Sui army, the latter was smashed and scattered, and could not exploit the advantage of their superior number.

On the other side of the plains, there was a small hill, which was where the command center of the warriors in green was located. There were several horses, with their riders on their back, standing on top of the hill. They were using red, blue, and yellow, three colors signal light to control the advance and retreat movements of the warriors in green.

It was the first time that the two boys witnessed the desperate situation on the battlefield; momentarily they were stunned and forgot the purpose of their coming here.

After a good while, Kou Zhong came to his senses. Pointing to a cluster of sparse lights farther down, he said, "That must be another village or town. Perhaps the warriors in green are trying to stop the Sui army from going over there to kill and burn. What has actually happened?"

Xu Ziling sucked in a mouthful of cold air and said, "If they are people from Ol' Die's side and we interfere, won't it be the same as delivering ourselves to the mouth of the tiger?"

Kou Zhong thought for a moment, and then said, "How can Ol' Die's men have such a neat uniform? They must be from another militia. Hey, Xiao Ling! Are you afraid?"

Xu Ziling laughed aloud. Reaching out toward a tree nearby, he exerted his strength and broke two thick branches, about the same diameter as a child's arm, and around a zhang long. Tossing one branch to Kou Zhong, he said with a laugh, "To uphold chivalry, to be promoted and gain wealth, we are relying completely on these guys."

After removing the foliage, Kou Zhong shouldered the tree

branch and theatrically said, “Xu Zhuangshi [hero/warrior/fighter], please be my guest!”

Xu Ziling waved his branch several times in the air, and then holding it solemnly with both hands, he started to sing, “Whoosh, whoosh, cries the wind; River Yi is cold; brave men [zhuangshi, see above] once gone, will definitely return[1]. Ha! Laozi [‘I, your daddy’, used arrogantly or jocularly] is going!”

Amidst their laughter, the two boys, one in front the other followed behind, rushed down the hill.

But as they were about to charge to the plains, there was the ‘swish, swish’ sound of arrows. From the bushes about ten zhang ahead, a row of arrows were shot toward them.

The two boys have never had any experience dealing with arrows before, plus they had never anticipated there would be an ambush here. Terrified, they rolled down on the ground in such a sorry state. But the arrows flew overhead; they had just escaped a very dangerous situation.

The two boys’ courage vanished immediately. Crawling and rolling, they hid behind a cluster of rocks and trees that extended over ten zhang wide, and no longer dared to move.

Like a tidal wave the sound of stampeding feet flooding over

their hiding place. Suddenly there were Sui soldiers to their left and right, each one with a lance in his hand, charging toward them. It was not even clear how many soldiers were there.

It was only then did the two boys realize that while the warriors in green were heavily surrounded, the Sui troops who intercepted them right now were actually to prevent reinforcement from warriors in green's side from coming to their aid.

If the two boys had a choice, they would prefer to escape without any trace and not trying to be heroes. However, at this moment it was impossible to get away. Thereupon they jumped up and brandished their tree trunk, while exerting the entire strength in their body, wildly sweeping and striking the enemy.

Four lances were struck by the tree trunk and flew away, two of the lance wielders were even hit by the trunk that they dropped to the ground with head bleeding and broken.

Meanwhile, the enemy was in front and behind them, surrounding them with torches lifted high, bathing the area around them bright red.

A squad of saber and hatchet wielders burst into the encirclement, their chop and hack were directed toward the boys' tree trunk. Battle cry shook the heavens. While the two

boys managed to repel another round of attack, the tree trunk in their hands were only less than half their original size, but half of the enemy were not hurt yet.

Realizing their dire situation, Kou Zhong called out, "Climb up the rock!"

Xu Ziling somersaulted and followed him to fall back behind the pile of rocks. The enemy shouted, over ten lances were thrown toward them.

In this critical moment, the two boys became calm instead, as if they did not hear any sound, as well as no sound could penetrate their keen ears. The true qi within their body circulated at a rate several times faster than normal; in contrast, the pursuing troops and the thrown lances seemed to be slowing down considerably. They were able to see clearly the angle, as well as the speed and the order of arrival of each lance being thrown. It was a kind of feeling that even in their dream it was hard to achieve.

They stood back to back and brandished their tree trunk, which were only about four chi left. Poking to the left and sweeping to the right, blocking the front and resisting the rear, their movements flowed naturally, their defense was so tight that not one drop of water could trickle through.

When the enemy saw their lance lost its effectiveness, five, six

saber and hatchet wielders pounced onto the pile of rocks, they wanted to engage the boys in close combat, but the consequences was fatal.

Kou Zhong ducked down to dodge a broadsword, his tree trunk swept the saber wielder's ankle. The man immediately fell to the ground. Kou Zhong easily snatched the opponent's long saber and swiftly swept it across the lower abdomen of another Sui troop wielding an axe.

Meanwhile Xu Ziling also snatched another long saber; immediately his spirit rose. He threw the tree trunk and it hit a soldier, sending him tumbling down into the crevices between the rocks.

Xu Ziling immediately jumped toward Kou Zhong and said, "We break out!" Letting out a shout, they left the rock and charged into the enemy formation.

Xu Ziling unleashed the Bloody Battle Ten Styles taught by Li Jing, which would show its full potential in the battlefield anyway. He strode across, his long saber moved like lightning flashes. The saber did not seem to have anything special or amazing about it, but the enemy being attacked found it difficult to evade, and the lance in their hands seemed to lose its usefulness to block. Xu Ziling easily entered the gap, slashed the fatal point on their chest, and they fell back, their blood splashed, and their life gone.

Kou Zhong played with his wrist more. First he deflected two thrusting lances, and then he swept his saber across, a Sui soldier immediately had his throat slashed, and fell backward with miserable shriek.

The two boys had never imagined that the Bloody Battle Ten Styles was this formidable; their courage doubled. They felt that although the enemy was numerous, they were able to see clearly the strength and weakness of each enemy attack, and all the subtle changes surrounding the attack, so much so that from the pressure of the enemy's attack, they could even feel the power distribution on the peripheral; such feeling was certainly indescribable.

In that instant they forgot about life and death. In this noisy, chaotic battle, they displayed their survival instinct. In the face of hundreds of enemy with their flashing saber, spear, sword and lance, they remained fearless.

Quite naturally they worked together, and the coordination between them was like 'seamless heavenly clothes', they moved rapidly among the enemy ranks; you attack I defend, I block you deflect.

If they had to create this kind of combined attack technique, in normal times they would not be able to come up with anything even if they thought until their brains burst. But this instant it

simply came out like tidal waves, as if it was bestowed by the Heaven, without any trace of rough work-in-progress [orig. hatchet and chisel marks].

Xu Ziling brandished his saber and chopped ferociously, the true qi in his body was like the Great River surging out following the saber. The enemy did not even have time to raise their weapon to block, they could only watch helplessly as his saber, fast as lightning, entered their defense line and they fell to the ground in terror.

Kou Zhong's saber was ever-changing; the seemingly endless supply of strength from deep within his body followed the saber. Although the opponent exerted all his strength to block the saber, they could not deflect Kou Zhong's chop even half a fen; worse yet, the person was carried by the saber's momentum that he flipped and fell dead.

After Fu Junchuo taught them the 'Nine Mysteries Great Technique', in this extremely dangerous situation the two boys combined the 'Nine Mysteries Great Technique' with the totally-unrelated-to-martial-art 'Secret to Long Life', plus Li Jing's 'Bloody Battle Ten Styles' and the Beautiful Shifu's 'Bird Crossing Technique' to create their own one-of-a-kind fighting technique.

This moment inside the forest of lance, they felt that they could see gaps everywhere, hence they easily brushed the enemy's

lance away and advanced into the enemy's line of defense; then the enemy would be helpless to do anything and had to resign to their fate of being slaughtered. With each enemy downed, the power of their saber increased, until the enemy suffered a crushing defeat.

Originally the enemy saw that since there were only two of them, they only dispatched a company of approximately a hundred Sui soldiers to intercept. Now that they saw how the two boys charged into the formation left and right, and how formidable the boys' saber was, the Sui soldiers on the outer layer of the encirclement who cherished their lives scattered in all directions.

Actually, by this time the two boys have already felt that their qi was depleted; therefore, seeing the opening, they hastily pressed on with all their strength, in a flash they sprinted out and broke through the heavy siege, and successfully escaped.

After running about a hundred zhang or so, they reached the dense forest. The two boys threw themselves on the ground, while panting heavily.

Still wheezing, Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Ha! It worked! Such a big battle failed to kill us; have you ever thought about that?"

Xu Ziling stuck his saber into the mud; holding the hilt, he said while still gasping for breath, “In fight like that, we wasted too much energy. We should have preserved our strength so that we won’t have soft hands and weak legs like now.”

“Are you injured?” Kou Zhong asked, “My back was cut twice; luckily I could dodge quite fast.”

Xu Ziling shook his head, “Only my left thigh got a scrape from the lance, tearing my pants; not a big deal.”

After catching his breath, Kou Zhong said, “Shall we fight again or not? That militia does not seem to be well-off.”

Xu Ziling sat up and said, “Of course we fight! If we let those inhuman Sui soldiers enter that village or perhaps a market town, that dreadful situation we just saw might happen again.”

Kou Zhong crawled up in great delight. “Now that’s my good Xiongdi,” he said, “This time we must be a bit smarter; don’t let them cut us off midway.”

The two boys leaped to the top of a tree to be able to see the situation clearly, and then looping around a large circle they ran to the battlefield.

In this instant, they felt that they have grown up and not just

two marketplace ruffians.

[1] From 'River Yi Song' [yi shui ge], another name 'Song of Crossing River Yi'. The song is part of the Chu Ci, the Songs of Chu, ancient book of poems collected during Han, but especially from State of Chu. Allegedly it was composed by Jing Ke from the Warring States period [475-221 BC], who was commissioned by Prince Dan of Yan to go to Qin State to assassinate King of Qin, at the farewell dinner he gave by the River Yi. (baike.baidu.com) The original song, as translated by Yuri Pines, is as follows: 'Xiao xiao cries the wind, Yi waters are cold; Brave men, once gone, Never come back!' Here, Xu Ziling changed the last line to 'will definitely return'.

(http://www.academia.edu/2714137/A_He...g_Ke_Revisited)

Book 3 Chapter 2 – Crafty Plots And Intrigues

The two boys stealthily [orig. walk like a snake, crouch like a mouse], very carefully walked toward the battlefield. After crossing a sparse forest, they reached the southeast corner of the battlefield. But they were finally discovered by the enemy. From the bushes on the left side, six, seven Sui soldiers emerged with swords in their hands, shouting harshly at them, pouncing at them like mad tigers.

On the other side, soldiers were already in formation for battle. Within this tight formation, when a squad of about fifty cavalry heard the commotion, they also charged toward the two boys, brandishing their lances.

The boys did not fear the enemy as much as they used to; without a word they turned to meet the Sui soldiers on foot and swiftly moved their sabers to chop and hack.

Recalling the tragic situation in that town, where the buildings were burned to the ground and the people, as well as the animals were slaughtered by these soldiers, the two boys' heart was

burning with murderous intention. The persons followed the sabers, their imposing manner was way above the enemy's. The sabers split the air, the Sui soldiers fell face up, their swords flew away, not a single one was lucky enough to escape.

In the meantime, the cavalry arrived. Unleashing their qinggong the two boys dodged into the bushes where the horses could not chase them. But as soon as the horses left, they rushed out to the plains, and sneaked behind a company of archers and saber and hatchet wielders, who had never anticipated that the enemy would sneak in silently from behind. As a result, even after the two boys slaughtered quite a number of them like people chopping melons or slicing vegetables, they still thought that a large number of enemy reinforcement has arrived; hence they were thrown into chaos.

Several torches fell onto the bushes and set the grass on fire, which rapidly spread everywhere. But the two boys did not know that this fire would later on save their lives.

Actually, the number of Sui forces in this area reached three thousand. Quite a few experts with outstanding martial art skill included among these. Under normal circumstances, once they entered into the heavy siege, even people with strong martial art of Du Fuwei's caliber would have no choice but to fight with all their might and perish; much less two boys whose battle experience was severely lacking.

“This way!” Kou Zhong shouted. Five Sui soldiers stepped out to meet them.

Xu Ziling started later but he arrived first. He pounced forward, shaking out his long saber, launching the ‘Life or Death, Exist or Perish’ from the Bloody Battle Ten Styles. His saber moved like a giant wave rolling wildly onto the shore, his power overwhelming, one soldier immediately lost his life, another soldier was swept over and was thrown to the side. The other three cried out in fear and ran away.

The two boys have never tested their skill with such an impressive result. They whooped in delight, and continued their killing spree into the heart of the battle.

‘Dang!’ Suddenly someone blocked in front of Kou Zhong. Armed with a pair of awls he forcibly held Kou Zhong back that he was unable to advance a single step.

When Xu Ziling tried to pounce, he was also pushed back by the opponent.

Up to this point of the battle, the two boys have never encountered such a strong opponent.

Countless Sui soldiers thronged behind this man to attack the two boys. The person who blocked the two boys was actually a

high-ranking military officer of the Sui army. His countenance was ablaze with rage as he roared, “Tear these two boys apart into ten thousand pieces for me!”

In the meantime, on a high ground on a hill about half a li from the plains, close to two hundred warriors in green were standing in battle array, with strong bows and powerful arrows, tightly guarding right in the center of the formation a beautiful woman in white clothes, with her long hair draped over her shoulder.

Each time the beautiful woman gave out her order, the three men under her command in charge of signal light immediately waved the lanterns in three different colors strapped to the top of long poles, directing their warriors on the battlefield to advance, retreat, attack or defend.

Behind the beautiful woman stood four people in a row. Just by looking at their expression and manner, it was obvious that they were all martial art masters. The first one was a stout man with thick beard, the next one was an iron-tower like huge man, the third one was a man wearing scholarly attire, and the last one was a big middle0aged woman with an ugly face.

The longhaired beautiful woman said in soft voice, “That’s strange! How come the southeast corner of the enemy formation seemed to be in confusion? Who could be helping us?”

The four people behind her focused their attention to look, but they did not see anything different.

With deep contemplation in her beautiful eyes, the longhaired beautiful woman said, “We can’t see it on the surface; but I have an inkling from the way the opponent waves their command flag. If the confusion spread, we must exploit it well. Not only we might break through the heavy siege, we might have the chance to win the battle.”

The eyes of the man wearing scholar attire revealed an admiring look; he said respectfully, “Miss’ knowledge surpasses heaven and men, your proficiency in the art of war even shines like a torch, you are indeed a capable person.”

The ugly woman said, “In my opinion, if there is indeed reinforcement arriving, we ought to break out of the siege before planning any counterattack. Miss’ thousand-jin gold body must not be put in danger.”

As she spoke, the others immediately frowned because her screeching-owl like voice was grating their ears. But her remark gained support from the stout man with the thick beard. “When Duke Li sent us to protect Miss, he ordered us to place Miss’ safety above everything else,” he said in agreement.

A flash of displeased expression appeared on the longhaired

beautiful woman's unparalleled beautiful countenance; however, the tone of her voice was still as gentle and as tender as ever. She said nonchalantly, "As the commander-in-chief, how can I care only on myself in the face of death and let my troops suffer defeat like a landslide? If I cannot resist Qin Shubao's elite Sui troops and let him take over Fuchun, getting it back will be as hard as ascending to Heaven."

She had just finished speaking, the southeast corner suddenly burst into flames. The longhaired beautiful woman immediately saw from the subtle change in the enemy ranks that the opponent indeed appeared to be in confusion.

It must be noted that the southeast corner was the opponent's command center from which the enemy direct the troops on the battlefield; a slight change there would affect everything else*, unlike if the sudden change happened elsewhere, it would be inconsequential. [*literal translation: 'pull one hair and the whole body moves'. Funny, suddenly Disney-Pixar's Ratatouille came into my mind ...]

Maintaining her elegant, carefree, charming demeanor, the longhaired beautiful woman issued the order to launch all-around counter-offensive on the southeast corner as their primary target. The four people behind her drew their weapons as they gathered around the longhaired beautiful woman as she mounted her war-horse.

The more than two hundred riders galloped down the hill to join their two divisions of a thousand warriors each on the battlefield, unfolding a full-scale battle with the enemy.

Right this moment Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, two people, were caught in hard fighting and were unable to either advance or retreat. Suddenly the Sui army pulled back in all direction, because a group of warriors in green charged in on horseback, scattering the Sui troops all around them.

The two boys were delighted to obtain a chance to escape the siege. By this time their spirit weary, their strength exhausted, they could not exert any strength to continue, hence they turned around and fled under cover of the raging fire burning the grassland. Holding their breath, they rounded to the left and circled to the right to get far away from the battlefield.

Finally they dropped down on a hilltop, with no strength left to run. Like ocean tide bursts of battle cry were still heard from the distance.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "In the future we must not do such a foolish thing anymore. Even heroes are unable to withstand numerous enemies. Although we are not a hundred-percent hero, but the opponent have many men. You got it?"

"I wonder who that Sui general was," Xu Ziling said, "He is very

formidable. Fortunately we are fast, otherwise his awls would take away our lives.”

Kou Zhong let out a cold snort and said, “What kind of ‘thing’ is he? We only need two more rounds of battle experience, I guarantee we will be able to beat him. Ow!”

Noticing that just as he was, Kou Zhong was covered in blood all over, Xu Ziling asked in concern, “Any injury on vital point?”

Kou Zhong sneered and said, “If there is any injury on my vital point, would I be able to run to here? What a contradictory question you are asking me. Ah right! I’d better look at your wounds first.”

“What’s so good to look?” Xu Ziling replied, “After you look, then what? Fortunately we have miraculous skill of self healing; we’d better take a d@mn good sleep, tomorrow we’ll talk again!”

Kou Zhong dejectedly lay on the ground. Very soon the two boys circulated their inner breathing, and entered the state of emptiness.

Xu Ziling felt he was asleep, but when he opened his eyes, Kou Zhong was still sleeping soundly like he was dead on the grassy land. When he stretched his four limbs, he felt that the seven, eight wounds on his body were burning with pain.

The sun had just risen in the sky, all around were birdsong and fragrant flowers, the mountain was eerily quiet. The war last night seemed to be a distant and unreal nightmare. If not for the acute pain all over his body, he would think that such bloody battle has never happened.

A flock of birds flew unhurriedly over the seemingly still blue sky. In this instant, Xu Ziling seemed to capture a great mystery of the nature that has existed since time immemorial, but he was unable to describe it in concrete words.

Xu Ziling felt his heart was calm, his mind was bright and clear. After going through last night's battle, where he was continuously on the brink of death, he felt that he had entered a brand new stage in life. All the dangers and suffering were merely course of events that he must go through and experience as part of his spiritual journey.

Kou Zhong nudged him with his elbow, with a low chuckle he said, "You are staring blankly at the empty space, what are you thinking about?"

Xu Ziling sat up. Frowning, he looked at his tattered clothes and torn trousers, which was covered in bloodstains and filled with black soot. He said with a wry smile, "I am thinking of a clean set of clothes and a big dish of meat and vegetables. Other things can wait for a bit."

Kou Zhong struggled up; glancing to the left and right, he said in self-effacing way, “Xiaodi [little brother, referring to self] seems to lose my bearings. I can’t tell whether Pengcheng is to our east or west; what do you think? Shall we pick a direction at random and leave it to fate?”

Xu Ziling said, “How could Zhong Shao suddenly lose his head? A big city like Pengcheng must be connected by official roads. If we go back to the major road last night, we can humbly ask whomever we come across, I am sure we will find the right way.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Very true! Let’s go!”

The two boys looked for wild vine to casually fasten the saber on their back. Relying on their memory, they headed toward the ruins of the small town they saw last night.

After dashing madly for a while, covering at least seven or eight li, they slowed down their steps to look around to find their bearings. Kou Zhong laughed bitterly and said, “Looks like we are lost again. Otherwise we should have seen that town’s ruins. From here, we don’t see any people ahead, we don’t see any village behind; we can’t even find anybody we can ask direction from. Hey! What’s that?”

Xu Ziling had already noticed fire and smoke rising up from the

foot of a hill ahead; he happily said, "I don't care what that is. Once we go there, we will find out what it is."

The two boys ran down the hill. Who would have thought that although the place did not seem too far, it was already dusk when they reached it? Turned out it was a small village.

The smoke was spiraling upward from a kitchen chimney of the roof of one of the buildings, evidently some people were lighting the fire to cook dinner.

But Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were worried for their safety instead. This area was not far from the battlefield; if those worse-than-beast Sui soldiers came here, great catastrophe would befall the people of this village.

In the blink of an eye they reached the entrance to the village. They saw there were only about thirty houses in there, but the houses were spaced quite far apart from each other. Nevertheless, the village was quiet; there was not even any sound of chicken crowing or dog barking that was normally found in such village.

The two boys felt something was really, really not right. Kou Zhong said, "In this village, every door is tightly closed; it appears that the villagers had already run away elsewhere because of the war. That house with smoke rising from it, probably it was

someone passing through and used it to cook their food. Shall we go and try our luck? Worse case scenario, we can always run away. Relying on our qinggong, we shouldn't have any problem!"

Xi Ziling patted the saber on his back and laughed aloud, "We are not afraid of magnificent army with thousands of men and horses, why would we fear his mother's passerby? If it is traveling merchant, we'll ask him for a bowl of rice to eat, we may even offer our services as his temporary escort so that we can earn a bit of profit as traveling expense to look for Susu Jiejie."

Kou Zhong stuck out his chest and said, "I nearly forget that we are top-ranking martial art experts. Ha! Come on then!" And he took the lead striding into the village.

They saw the house with the smoke rising from its kitchen chimney was actually the largest house in the village. It was separated into front and rear sections, with a courtyard separating it, but the gates were tightly closed, giving them a mysterious feeling, especially because they did not hear a single noise.

"Anybody's home?" Kou Zhong called out.

He repeatedly called several times, but still no response.

Xu Ziling was rather nervous; he nudged Kou Zhong and said,

“Let’s just go and forget about it.”

Kou Zhong sneered and said, “Are you forgetting our status as martial art masters? We’ll go in to take a look, perhaps the person has already gone, but he left a couple bowls of rice for us.”

Stepping toward the door, he used his leg to push, the door succumbed and opened. The two boys stepped over the threshold and entered the main hall. They saw that all the furniture and household utensils were still there, but everything was covered with dust; there were even cobwebs on the corners, evidently this house has been abandoned for quite some time. They could not help feeling odd.

Walking across the courtyard, they entered the residential section at the back, and found that not a soul was inside the house. Who lighted the fire in the kitchen and created the spiraling smoke from the chimney earlier? But by this time the fire was very weak, it nearly died out.

While Xu Ziling was looking for any traces on the floor, Kou Zhong’s voice was heard from the rear hall, “Xiao Ling, come here. I found half of your dreams.”

Xu Ziling did not have time to decipher what he meant by that; he rushed over toward one of the rooms on the rear wing. As soon as stepped over the door, something assaulted his face like

a black cloud. Stretching out his hand to catch it, he found it to be a piece of clean linen clothes.

He saw a large chest dragged out from under the bed, its lid was opened, and Kou Zhong was pulling pile after pile of clothing and other personal items, and scattered everything on the bed; it was like he was in a treasure hunt, picking to the left and digging to the right.

The two boys were in high spirit. After changing into new clothes, they felt like a new person; only their stomach was rumbling with hunger; it was indeed a big fly in the ointment.

Meanwhile the sky was getting dark, the two boys searched everywhere, but could not find even half a grain of rice or wheat.

Kou Zhong said, "Every village must have some kind of grove of fruit trees; you stay here to prepare the bed, I'll go pick some good fruits to allay our hunger. They have all kinds of beds here, we will spend the night here and continue on our journey tomorrow."

Xu Ziling nodded his agreement, and they went their separate ways.

Half a day later, Kou Zhong returned with a big rooster in his hand; he said, "Turns out there are still some domestic animals

left. Hey! There is a very big burial site at the back, mostly new graves. Looks like not all of the villagers have left, perhaps they died of some kind of epidemic.”

Xu Ziling gasped; he said, “In that case, the clothes we are wearing ...”

Kou Zhong went to the courtyard to take care of the rooster; he called out, “There’s at least one person who did not die; otherwise, who buried all those dead people? Maybe it was the person who lighted the fire?”

Hearing that, Xu Ziling was absolutely horrified; he went to the courtyard, pulled Kou Zhong up, and said, “Wouldn’t it be better to go to the next house? I’ll get the fiint!”

Although on the surface Kou Zhong always put on an extremely daring appearance, he was actually very nervous inside as well; immediately he gave his full support to Xu Ziling’s proposal, and they both moved to a comparatively smaller house on the other side of the village.

After having their stomach filled, the weather suddenly turned windy. The two boys did not dare to touch the beds or the couches; they closed all the doors and windows, and huddled in the corner to rest. Although they were nervous and jittery, eventually they succumbed to their weary body and fell into deep

slumber.

In the middle of the night the two boys woke up with a start. As they sat up in bewilderment, they heard the sound of hoof beats filling the air outside the house.

They crawled up toward the window and looked out, and saw a band of riders swarming into the village, their horses looked big and tall, their clothes and adornment looked bold and powerful, with quivers of arrows on their backs, and their appearance looked rough and wild, unlike people of the Central Earth.

This group had approximately thirty men, one of them appeared particularly majestic, carrying roughly eight chi long rectangular box on his back, yet he did not seem to be burdened by it and appeared to be carrying it effortlessly.

Arriving in the middle of the village, the man carrying the box jumped down the horse with ease, and put the box in the middle of the road, while the other men also dismounted their horses.

One of them, a tall and slim man who appeared to be the leader, was still sitting high on his horse; he signaled his men to search. With the exception of the huge man with the box, the rest of his men spread out, kicking on doors and entering the houses.

Each and every single man was skillful, vigorous and nimble,

and they all moved in such a fast and efficient way; which clearly showed that these were men with consummate and overwhelming martial art skill. Watching this, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling no longer remembered that they themselves were martial art experts. They jumped up onto the beam, and hid themselves in the space between the beam and the roof, which they considered a comparatively hidden and safe place.

Underneath, sound of footsteps came and then left, but then it came again, followed by the sound of something heavy hitting the floor. The two boys could not refrain from peeking down. Turned out the men brought the box into this house and placed it right under the two boys. It was only then did the boys realize that the box had a dozen or so small holes on it.

Four men stood guard in front of and behind the door; they all looked tense.

And then someone walked into the house. The two boys hastily shrunk their heads back and stopped breathing from their mouth and nose, and just used their inner breathing, because they did not dare to make any noise.

The people down below talked rapidly in some language that they had never heard before, which confirmed their suspicion earlier that these men were from outside the Central Earth. The boys were at a loss even more.

The men down below suddenly stopped talking.

It was quite some times later that Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling heard hoof beats from outside the village. They grew increasingly nervous and were afraid to make the slightest bit of noise, because clearly these foreign men's sense of hearing was several levels above theirs.

The men spoke a few more sentences before stepping out of the house together.

Kou Zhong reached out to write on Xu Ziling's back: 'There must be a person inside the box, otherwise why made ventilation holes?' Xu Ziling nodded in agreement.

Meanwhile another group of riders pulled into the village. From the sound of the hooves, this group had comparable number of men with the first one.

The hoof beats suddenly stopped. A man's voice rang out, "Zu Junyan under Pushan Gong's [Duke of Pushan (Mount Pu)] command sincerely wishes your distinguished country's Shibi Khan's dragon body good health."

Shibi Khan was the Turkic people's great Khan.

A long laughter outside the house responded, "Turns out it's

Mr. Zu Junyan, a warrior under Duke Mi, who is well versed in letters and military matters. I wonder if Mister brought the thing that our Khan requested.”

Zu Junyan calmly replied, “Excuse me, General, how should Zaixia [myself (humble)] address you?”

Another majestic voice from the Turkic side spoke up, “People say that Zu Junyan has wide learning and retentive memory, and is known as the most experienced and knowledgeable figure of Duke Mi’s subordinate outside of the ‘Handsome Military Counselor’ Shen Luoyan; how come you did not even recognize our General Yan?”

Zu Junyan laughed and said, “Turns out it’s General Yan Lihui, who made his name as the ‘Twin Spears General’. In that case, this friend must be the ‘Dauntless Lion’ Tie Xiong. Zaixia has eyes but fail to see.”

Letting out a cold snort, Yan Lihui said, “Let’s cut all this crap, shall we? Where is it?”

Unfazed, Zu Junyan replied, “Zaixia wishes to see Miss first before showing the treasure. This is Duke Mi’s order. General please forgive me.”

Listening to all these, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, who were sitting

the beam, were shaken. The 'Miss' that Zu Junyan mentioned, could she be Susu's master? They recalled Susu once said that it was because they were being attacked that she wandered about destitute in rural areas of Jiangnan.

At the same time the two boys were thinking about the box below. Was 'Big Boss' Zhai Rang's [see Book 1 Chapter 10] beloved daughter [orig. 'pearl in the palm'] inside the box?

Kou Zhong wrote on Xu Ziling's back again: 'Wait for an opportunity to save her!'

Outside, Yan Lihui's cold laugh was heard, "The treasure in hand, we will release the person. The words of our Khan have never been spoken in vain. If Mister does not show the treasure, what the Big Boss get could very well be only the body of his beloved woman. All blame will be put on Mister's head."

Zu Junyan let out a long laugh and said, "The Jade Annulus of the He Clan is precisely inside the bundle on my back. You hand over the person, we hand over the goods; this has been our agreement. If there are any changes in the meantime, the responsibility ought to fall into General's hands."

It was as if a thunderbolt had just crashed inside Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's mind; it was only then did they know that the treasure these men were talking about was, unexpectedly, the Jade

Annulus of the He Clan, which fame has spread throughout all ages.

Right this moment, a sudden change occurred down below.

The back door suddenly shattered like flying sand, the two martial art experts Turkic guards did not even have time to react, they were sent out flying off the ground and died a violent death. By the time the other two men realized what had happened, a dark shadow flew over the two men's head, and powerfully grabbed and shattered the Tian Ling acupoint on the top of their head. The most frightening thing was that breaking the door, sending the dead bodies off the ground, and killing people with bare hands; everything was done in silence. It was as if everything was a routine activity that had nothing to do with this person.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling knew that this person's martial art skill has already reached the near-perfect state, plus its nature was extremely soft, his movement was as fast as a ghost. Before the shattered door even reached the floor, he had already killed four Turkic martial art masters guarding the wooden chest.

The two boys' mind went blank; they did not dare to look down anymore, even their internal breathing was slowing down considerably.

If it were not because of their mysterious skill came from the

one and only 'Secret to Long Life', that when they circulate their breathing it would not arouse a martial art expert's alertness, that their qi and pulse, their heartbeat and vital signs slowed down nearly to the level of dead people, they would have been discovered by this person early on.

This man's martial art skill was extremely high, it was definitely not below Du Fuwei's.

'Creak!' the lid of the chest suddenly opened up.

The man cried out in surprise, followed by the loud sound of qi and force collided, and then there were repeated noise that sounded like muffled thunder.

'Boom!' In the midst of an ear-splitting explosion, the brick wall to the left shattered. Unexpectedly it was actually the man who broke it; he then flew out of the opening, and ran far away, while letting out an earth-shattering fierce cry. His power was extremely astounding that the whole house was shaking.

Brick and mortar shot everywhere, including onto Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's body. Although they had their true qi protecting their body, they still felt unbearable pain; another evidence that this man's internal energy was really strong.

The two boys could not bear it anymore, they looked down

again.

They saw the chest had turned into wood splinters, the furniture inside the room had also turned into a sea of wood fragments. A man, as majestic as a mountain, wearing an oversized black gown, was standing in the middle of the room, facing the hole on the wall, regulating his breathing in full concentration.

From the two boys' angle of view, although they could not see his face, it was clear that this man was wearing a sinister, hideous mask on his face.

They heard gusts of wind; several people flew into the room from the hole on the wall, as well as from the front and back doors, scaring the two boys that they hastily shrank back into hiding.

Zu Junyan's voice was the first to be heard, "He is injured!"

A strange, unbelievable, hard-to-describe feeling rose up in the two boys' heart.

According to reason, the man who came to rescue his Big Boss' daughter ought to be on Zu Junyan's side, and the mysterious man who was hiding inside the chest ought to be his enemy. However, from the tone of his voice, Zu Junyan seemed to be on

the mysterious man's side?

More unimaginable things followed; they heard the Turkic martial art master Yan Lihui's voice speaking up, "Zhai Rang made it this far, this is the first time that he ever sustained any injury. This will make his sacrifice and achievements in the past proved to be fruitless."

Tie Xiong spoke with a cold snort, "It shows that he is a man without understanding of the times."

The two boys realized now that Zu Junyan had betrayed Zhai Rang and Li Mi, and had allied himself with the Turkic people and put on a play. No wonder the Turkic people knew Susu's Miss' whereabouts and kidnapped her away.

A deep and low, yet soft voice spoke up, "Even though we failed to kill him, we have achieved the desired result. This place is not suitable for us to stay too long, we should proceed with our plan."

Both Zu Junyan and Yan Lihui, along with their separate troops, responded in unison.

Soon the people down below left until none remained. But the two boys were so scared that it broke their guts. It was just before dawn that they finally found their courage to slip down

and left quietly.

Book 3 Chapter 3 – Betting Against Beautiful Woman

After traveling for more than ten li in one stretch, they reached a secluded forest. Only then did the two boys dare to stop and pick up some wild fruits to eat.

Kou Zhong heaved a deep sigh and said, “The man who attacked Zhai Rang sneakily is definitely not a Turkic, otherwise he would have the same accent as Yan Lihui and the other Turkic people; who could he be?”

Xu Ziling was sitting by his side; still having lingering fear in his heart, he said, “That Zu Junyan is really despicable, conspiring with outsiders against his own Boss; we must expose him.”

“Who would believe us?” Kou Zhong replied with a wry smile, “We have no control over this kind of matter. The most important thing right now is to pick up Susu Jiejie, and immediately get her out of the danger zone, lest disaster will find her like the fish in the moat [see Book 1 Chapter 11]. Would you like me to be the matchmaker to arrange your marriage to Susu Jiejie?”

Xu Ziling angrily said, “You still have time to joke around in time like this? You’d better find the way to Pengcheng first, and then we’d do a couple of business transaction without any capital, get a couple of fast horses to take us to Rongyang. That is most important.”

Kou Zhong sprang up, patted his chest and said, “Leave it to me. Just now when we were on top of the hill, I saw a temple in the distance. We can go to that temple to ask for directions. Let’s hit the road!”

The two boys continued their journey. But when the temple was in sight, they were greatly disappointed.

The way leading to the temple was full of weeds; apparently it has been a long time since any human ever set foot on this path. Clearly this temple was an abandoned broken-down temple.

In time when war was raging continuously, even an entire town could turn into ghost town; much less just a temple.

When they reached the external wall of the temple, it was indeed dilapidated and lifeless.

Kou Zhong said with a wry smile, “At least we will have roof over our head; tonight we’ll sleep here!”

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “I really miss last night’s roast chicken. You possess great magical power, why don’t you conjure another one up for me to see?”

Kou Zhong pulled him toward the main gate. Just as they stepped over the threshold, they got a big shock. Two coffins were placed side to side in the temple’s main hall; both were covered in dust and cobwebs, and looked extremely creepy.

The two boys were numb as they stood there as in a trance.

After a long time Kou Zhong finally said, “Do you dare to sleep in here?”

Xu Ziling shook his head emphatically; he said, “There’s nothing good in here; I’d rather sleep outside with the sky as our roof and the earth as our bed.”

Kou Zhong couldn’t agree more, “Let’s go!” he said.

They were just about to leave when suddenly, ‘bang!’ one of the coffin lid shot out and flew toward the two boys.

The two boys were scared out of their wits and screamed together, “Ghost!” as they urged their feet to run like crazy out of the temple.

Suddenly they heard a loud shout from behind, someone was shouting angrily, “Kids, where do you think you are going?”

The two boys got their senses back; turning around, they saw the Sui general who wielded a pair of awls last night at the battlefield, was running toward them. He had shed off his armor and helmet, and was only wearing a regular warrior suit.

As long as it was human and not ghost, it would be a lot easier to deal with. Kou Zhong pulled the long saber on his back, stood in the middle of the courtyard, and laughed aloud. “Turns out it’s an old friend!” he said.

Like a lightning the Sui general was already in front of him; raising his pair of awls, he took Kou Zhong’s saber head-on.

Seeing the fierceness of the opponent’s move, Kou Zhong did not dare to meet hard with hard. Unleashing the ‘Crossing Bird Technique’, he swiftly darted a zhang away.

But Xu Ziling refused to back down, he charged forward with his saber to meet the awls.

‘Dang! Dang!’ Xu Ziling was shaken and had to take two steps back.

Meanwhile Kou Zhong attacked from the side, his saber surged on like tidal waves, rolling around toward the opponent.

The man stayed calm and unhurried, the awls in his left and right hands moved in continuous attack, separately blocking the two boys' long sabers, alternating between wide open and tightly close, but the variation within the moves was endless. Momentarily Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were helpless to deal with him.

But this man's formidable martial art skill only aroused the two boys' fighting spirit. They were using him as their sparring partner in practicing their saber play. The more they fought, the braver they were; the longer they fought, the more proficient they got, until finally they managed to force him falling back repeatedly.

The man launched a fake attack, and then floated backward.

The two boys halted. "Why stop fighting?" they asked in chorus.

"Cannot beat you, why continue fighting?" the man retorted.

Seeing he was this forthcoming, a good impression grew in the two boys' heart.

"Where are your troops?" Xu Ziling asked.

The man returned his awls to his back, his eyes gleaming with cold ray as he said, “If not for you, two people, disturbing my, Qin Shubao’s troop formation, how could I be defeated by that stinky woman [poniang] Shen Luoyan? Although I cannot kill you today, I will never forget this big enmity.”

Kou Zhong sneered and said, “So you consider that a big enmity? You Sui army are worse than beasts; burning the whole town is not enough, even people and livestock are not spared, yet you still rape and murder the women; how are we going to settle this blood debt? I really wish that Shen poniang would get rid of you.”

Qin Shubao was shocked, “Is there such thing?” he asked.

Thereupon Xu Ziling narrated the tragedy they personally witnessed the other night. Hearing this, Qin Shubao shook his head and sighed; he dejectedly said, “Just put that blood debts on my, the Ol’ Qin’s account. In any case, when the Ol’ Qin go back this time, it will be hard to avoid losing my head; so I don’t care about anything anymore.”

Kou Zhong was puzzled, “Since you know you are going to lose your head, why go back?” he asked,

“You are just a little kid, what do you know?” Qin Shubao

replied impatiently, “Just get lost from laozi’s presence; if you provoke my anger, I will drag you down to the grave with me.”

Kou Zhong had an idea; he laughed and said, “To a dead person, money is useless. Since you are going to go back and deliver your life, it would be best if you use your money to accumulate merit and do good works; why don’t you give all your money to us, brothers? To requite evil with good, won’t this benevolence worth doing?”

Qin Shubao intently looked at the two boys, sizing them up; a moment or two later, he burst into laughter and said, “You, these two little kids, your martial art skill is not bad, plus you are getting more and more formidable; who could have thought that you are actually just two poor wretches. So be it! All the money I have is barely enough for us to eat a good meal. Before I die, let me, Qin Shubao, be your host, and give you your mother’s big meal, and then we’ll go our separate ways!”

Xu Ziling was skeptical, “You are not going to look for an opportunity to harm us, are you?”

‘Pei!’ Qin Shubao spat; he said angrily, “Who do you think you are? By the time I, Qin Shubao, started to fight in the south and attack to the north, you were still hiding behind your mother’s breast, peeing in terror and crying for your Niang. Since you can’t tell the good from the bad, the deal is off; don’t even think that I

will give you half a penny.”

Kou Zhong struck while the iron is still hot^[1], saying, “You really are sincere. Let us go to the best wine shop in Pengcheng; if we don’t have enough money to settle the bill, we will ask you, Laoge [old big brother], to take the full responsibility.”

Qin Shubao laughed aloud and took the lead.

Chatting and joking, the three of them walked for a while, and then they saw the glittering light of a river ahead, reflecting the starlight in the sky above. Qin Shubao pointed to a high mountain in a distant to their left, saying, “That is Mount Luliang [in Shanxi], Pengcheng County lies about thirty li northwest of the mountain. The road ahead is Sishui [lit. river Si, county in Jining, Shandong]. We will stop for the night here, come daybreak tomorrow, we’ll find a boat to go to Pengcheng, and save our leg muscles a little bit.”

“If you use your money to hire a boat, will we have enough money to eat and drink?” Xu Ziling wondered aloud.

Qin Shubao patted the pair of awls on his back and said, “Do we need money to ride a boat? Who would dare to inconvenience me, the Ol’ Qin?”

Kou Zhong was flabbergasted, “All soldiers are evil people,” he

said.

Recalling his own impending fate, Qin Shubao dejectedly said, “Stop deriding me.” Taking off his pair of awls, he lay down on the grassy land by the river, using his awls as the pillow.

The two boys also took their long saber off their back, and copying him, they lay down on the grass. Watching the disappearing stars above, they realized soon it would be daybreak.

Qin Shubao said, “I still don’t know your, two little kids’ names.”

After telling him their names, Kou Zhong said, “We consider you, laoge as a true friend, plus we know you are going to lose your head, hence we told you our real names. But you must never tell anybody else, otherwise, we won’t live much longer than you do.”

“Are you wanted criminals?” Qin Shubao asked in surprise, “In time like this, who has time to pay attention to you?”

“It’s really hard to explain in a few words,” Xu Ziling said, “But it’s the truth.”

Qin Shubao cheerfully said, “You consider the Ol’ Qin as your friend, naturally I won’t betray you, and I don’t want to know

your background either. But honestly, your saber technique can be considered quite advance, ordinary folks will find it difficult to be your match. More importantly, you are still young, in the future you will definitely become great men. The most formidable thing is that you continuously create new moves that change according to the situation. The second time we fought, I had to strain a lot harder to deal with you. It was almost a miracle.”

Being praised by him, the two boys felt they were floating in the air like immortals. But Qin Shubao suddenly sat up and turned his gaze toward Mount Luliang, and heaved a sigh.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly puzzled, they also sat up to accompany him. “What’s so special about that mountain?” Kou Zhong asked.

Qin Shubao sadly said, “There’s nothing special about that mountain, but there is a very special woman on the mountain. I rarely thought of her all these years, but now that my days are numbered, I can’t help thinking about her.”

Sympathizing with him, Xu Ziling said, “Qin Laoge should go see her first before making other plans. Perhaps after seeing her you won’t be so foolish as to go back to have your head chopped by other people.”

“You can easily lose your life in battlefield anyway,” Kou Zhong

added, “Henceforth you can conceal your identity and live a peaceful life.”

Smiling wryly, Qin Shubao said, “How can you understand me? I would rather die than being an ordinary citizen. Right now the imperial court is looking for talents, perhaps I can render merits to redeem my crime. If I really don’t have any other choice but to die, do you think I would go back?”

Relieved, Xu Ziling said, “I see. In that case, you ought to go see your sweetheart even more.”

Qin Shubao laughed aloud and said, “It’s just a wishful thinking on my part; she is the thousand-jin (catty) gold [i.e. daughter (honorific)] of the Sect Leader of Luliang Pai, while I am only a poor soldier. I only have the qualifications to look at her from the distance several times, but after I met her, every time I had intimate relationship with women [Translator’s note: the original word is the vulgar version], I always pictured them as she. Ay! This year she ought to be twenty, I am afraid she is already married and bore children.” The last sentence was spoken with a sob.

The two boys scrutinized his appearance; they saw that although his built looked strong and powerful, his face looked like cast-iron, adorned with wind and frost [i.e. hardship]. His cheekbones were a bit too high, so that in comparison, his

sparkling, lively eyes looked a tad low; in short, he could not be considered handsome. Definitely not the type of men whom women would likely pour out their affection to.

Noticing the sky was turning bright, Qin Shubao stood up and said, “I don’t know why I told you, two kids, the load on my mind. Look! A boat’s coming.”

The two boys followed him running to the shore.

A small sailboat was sailing upstream. Since the three people had sharp eyes, they could see that there was only one person on the boat, wearing a long robe and a bamboo rain hat, standing at the stern to steer the boat. A fishing net was spread across the deck, and several bamboo baskets were strewn on the bow.

Qin Shubao waved and called out, “Laoxiong [‘old chap’], can you give us a ride?”

[1] Orig. ‘beat the snake following the stick’. From baike.baidu.com: the full idiom is ‘wooden stick beats the snake, the snake follows the stick’; meaning: one can look at an opportunity and seize the opportunity to increase the benefit/advantage.

The man did not pay them any attention, he steered the boat

toward the distant shore on the opposite side instead, as if he intentionally wanted to avoid them.

Qin Shubao signaled the two boys, and soared into the air, crossing about four zhang of water surface, toward the sailboat.

Prior to this, the longest distance the two boys were able to jump was only three zhang. But since they had no choice, they simply braced themselves and jumped with all their strength.

One after another the three people landed on the fishing net between the sail mast and the stern. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling cheered together, they were very pleased with their own progress.

“Aiyo!” the fisherman cried out with shrill voice, “You broke my net!”

The three people looked at each other; turned out ‘he’ was a ‘she’, a young woman with sweet, pleasant-to-the-ear voice.

Right that moment, the woman raised her right hand to pull something from the thin air, the net where the three people were standing on was suddenly closing up, trapping the three people like fish in the net, hanging from the mast in a very pathetic condition.

It was only then did they realize that the net was tied on its four corners with long, thin, transparent natural silk strings that were connected to an iron axle high up on the mast. Under the bright sunlight, it was almost invisible, so that they were being negligence and fell into the trap. The strange thing was that the transparent and thin silk strings were able to withstand the three people's weight, which was more than 200 catties. [Translator's note: I don't think 200 catties is correct, because that means on average one person weighed only about 30kg; but I translated it as is.]

Three people struggled hard, the net was swaying continuously, but with each sway, the net tightened a bit, until the three of them were squeezed into a ball, that they nearly could not even move their fingers.

The woman laughed aloud; she lifted up the bamboo hat, and her thick, beautiful hair instantly cascaded down like a waterfall.

Qin Shubao's voice cracked, "Shen Luoyan!" As soon as he finished speaking, following the swaying of the net, his face turned to the other side.

The beautiful woman shed her long robe, exposing plain yellow, skintight warrior suit underneath, her waist was wrapped in wide blue belt. She smiled coyly as she looked at the three people she caught in the net.

Kou Zhong cried out, “I am about to die, I am going to die soon! Why haven’t you let us out? Aiya! Don’t struggle!”

Shen Luoyan was exactly like her name suggested: female beauty captivating even the birds and beasts [chen yu luo yan, lit. fish sink, goose alights; an idiom from Zhuangzi]. Her pair of eyes was just like limpid lake waters in the fall [again, an idiom describing a woman’s beautiful eyes], perfectly matched her pretty eyebrows extending onto her slender temples. Her skin was snowy white like jade, coupled with her elegant and graceful demeanor, she was indeed a rare beauty that was not inferior to Yun Yuzhen in any way.

Rarer still, she exuded some kind of noble air that could shake other people’s heart, that could make any man who look at her to adore her, while feeling ashamed of his own inferiority.

Running her fingers on her hair, she brushed it aside to reveal her face, which could bewitch men’s heart. “Keep calm and don’t get excited,” she said nonchalantly, “Let Xiao Nuzi [little/lowly woman] speaks a few words, and then I will put you down.”

After another tender laughter, she said in soft voice, “Qin Shubao! Do you surrender? This net is the ‘Capturing Immortals Net’, the handiwork of number one craftsman in the world, Lu Miaozi; even immortals fall for it.”

At this moment her thick hair and lower garment were blown by the river breeze, sticking to her body at the front, and fluttering lightly behind her, highlighting her sweet, fair and graceful figure and her exceptional charm, making people believed even more than she was a fairy descending to the mortal world.

The two boys were staring dumbly at her, but Qin Shubao angrily said, "If that night these two kids did not mess around and spoil my troop disposition, the one being the prisoner would be you, this stinky woman. You just won by luck!"

Xu Ziling also angrily said, "Didn't you hear that? We are your benefactors, how could you treat the benefactors who save you life like this?"

Shen Luoyan laughed heartily, "Of course not!" she said.

With a wave of her left hand, the fishnet fell heavily on the deck, and immediately opened up.

The three people were burning with anger, this humiliation was difficult to endure. Shouting in unison, they pulled out their weapons to kill her.

Shen Luoyan pulled her sword from the stern and drew three sword-flowers, her sleeves floated in the air, she successively

blocked the three people's attack.

‘Ding! Ding! Dang! Dang!’ As each weapon made contact with her sword, they all felt that her sword contained infinite consecutive changes, which not only neutralize their current attack, they felt that if they pressed on with another round of attack, it would also be defused. Overwhelmed with shock, the three people successively retreated to the bow, away from the fishnet.

The trio exchanged glances; a feeling of dread of her exquisite swordplay started to grow in their hearts.

Still calm and unruffled in the midst of fighting, Shen Luoyan sat on a small stool on the stern. Placing her sword horizontally across her knees, she smiled and said, “Do you, three big men, have the guts to listen to me say a few words?”

Qin Shubao coldly said, “Ol’ Qin is the general of a defeated army, if you want to take my head, please do so with my respect, but if you want me to betray the imperial court to enter the Wagang Army, let Ol’ Qin advise you to forget this delusion.”

Shen Luoyan let the river breeze blow her hair freely, her soul-hooking beautiful eyes swept the three people. Finally her gaze stopped at Qin Shubao's face; with a delicate laughter she said, “I am surprised that such a grand general does not dare to listen to

a lowly woman's words. Very well! You may go. But two Xiao Xiongdi, please stay, let Luoyan expresses my gratitude properly."

Kou Zhong was delighted. "Staying, that won't be necessary," he said, "Right now what we, two brothers lack the most is money. Beautiful Junzhi [military advisor], whatever money you have on you, please just give it to us!"

"Pfft!" Shn Luoyan burst into laughter; covering up her mouth in mock anger she said, "Who would have imagined that you are this greedy? You want money? Then follow me home."

It does not matter whether she was lifting a hand or moving a leg, her movements were overflowing with charm. Although Qin Shubao turned a blind eye to her, but the two boys were unable to take their eyes off her.

Shen Luoyan turned her gaze back to Qin Shubao; pretending to be surprised, she said, "Great General, why are you reluctant to leave?"

Qin Shubao angrily said, "These two kids have nothing to do with Ol' Qin. Truth be told, I even have animosity toward them for causing me to lose the battle. Shen Luoyan, if you think that you can use them to threaten me, you are gravely mistaken."

Xu Ziling replied in surprise, "Even if she wanted to detain us, I

am afraid she does not have the ability; how could she use us to threaten you, laoge?”

Qin Shubao shook his head and said, “You must never underestimate this woman [just remember that in all these, the term ‘woman’ was derogatory]. Other than being famous as the ‘Pretty Junshi’, she also has another nickname, ‘Serpent and Scorpion Beauty’ [interestingly, the dictionary gave ‘Femme Fatale’ as alternate definition]. From Wagang Army’s world [tian xia], at least one quarter can be attributed to her. Even our Grand Marshal, the ‘Henan Road’s Twelve Counties Recovery Ambassador’ Zhang Xutuo was lured into her ambush and perished in the battlefield.”

Shen Luoyan was displeased, “Toward the two Xiao Xiongdi, I only have good intention; you, Qin Shubao, can be considered an important person, don’t start a rumor to slander me, a lowly woman, will you? Besides, Shen Luoyan really cannot live up to what General Qin said. When all is said and done, Luoyan is only a pawn under Pushan Gong [Duke of Mount Pu(?)]. If we are talking about devising battle plan in a tent, determining victory a thousand li away, who under the heavens in the present day can surpass Mi Gong? [Duke Mi]”

After a short pause, she continued, “Before the battle of Dahai Temple [lit. big ocean], Mi Gong already said, ‘Xutuo is brave, but foolhardy. When his troops enjoy sudden victory, he was very arrogant, hence he could be captured in one battle. But the three

generals under his command, Qin Shubao, Luo Shixin and Cheng Yaojin, are rare talents. If we cannot use them, they must be killed!’ It is due to Mi Gong’s injunction that Luoyan exhausted my lips and tongue to advise you, General, to renounce the dark and seek the light. Bright generals must have brilliant master. Right now destiny has already been determined, the demise of Sui Clan is at hand, all the people in the world long for brilliant master. If General Qin still wants to help tyrannical ruler, please feel free to leave. But these two Xiao Xiongdi must follow Luoyan home.”

Turning to the two boys, she smiled sweetly and said, “If I don’t go home, I won’t have any money to give you!”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other. Their scalps turned numb; apparently Qin Shubao’s conjecture was not incorrect, this woman was more formidable than their Beautiful Shifu.

Qin Shubao looked around, he still could not see what other trick she was preparing to deal with him. With a deep voice he said, “O! Qin has never cowered under others’ threat.”

Shen Luoyan laughed coquettishly, “Isn’t General going to commit suicide at Sishui? Why don’t you make a bet with us? Right now Luoyan will let General and two Xiao Xiongdi go freely, within the next six sichen, you may go anywhere. After that, within three days I will capture you three times, but I guarantee

that I won't harm even half a strand of hair on your body. If you lose, you must obediently join us, the Pushan Gong's force, and must not show any disloyalty."

Xu Ziling protested, "We are your benefactors, why do you include us, two people?"

Shen Luoyan frowned and said, "I was only thinking for your good! When Mi Gong obtain the world in the future, you won't have to ask for money everywhere like little beggars."

Qin Shubao threw his head backward and roared in laughter, "Very well! It's a deal. Just consider what happened just now as the first one. If you have the ability to capture Ol' Qin two more times, Ol' Qin will have to choice but to surrender."

Shen Luoyan also laughed and said, "Qin Shubao is indeed a hero and a real man."

Turning toward Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, two boys, she said, "It would be nice if you have half of Qin Xiong's heroic spirit."

Qin Shubao shouted, "How can you, Shen Luoyan, judge these two Xiongdi? Let us go!"

The trio let out a loud yell and leaped off the sailboat toward the shore, and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Shen Luoyan looked at the direction the three of them disappearing, an enigmatic smile appeared on the corner of her mouth.

Book 3 Chapter 4 – Fallen Into The Trap And Captured.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, along with Qin Shubao ran to the top of a small hill, behind them was a link of mountain ridges, while ahead of them was a great plain, extending as far as their eyes could see. About five li to their left River Si was flowing into the wilderness; no human footprint was to be seen.

Qin Shubao sat down and said, “Let’s take a rest for a while to compose ourselves.”

The two boys followed his lead and sat down on the grassy meadow. “Who is that Lu Miaozi guy?” Kou Zhong asked, “He can make such a formidable net to capture people.”

Qin Shubao shook his head, “I am not too clear myself,” he said, “Ay! How can you still have time to mind other people’s business?”

After lost in thought for half a day, he turned to the two boys

and said, “Since you two have helped her dealing with out Great Sui Army, it was such a good opportunity, why didn’t you join their Wagang Army?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other; recalling Zu Junyan colluding with foreign power against the Big Boss, Zhai Rang, there was lingering fear in their heart. The latter replied, “We recently saw a little affair concerning Wagang Army, hence we lost interest in joining them.”

Qin Shubao did not question closely, he thought aloud, “Shen Luoyan is the number one tactician under Li Mi’s command, her scheming skill excels above others; since she said she is going to capture alive, it must not be an empty word. Let us play along with her, we will go our separate way, so that she cannot attend to us simultaneously, hence we are disrupting her troops disposition.”

Kou Zhong shook his head and said, “Xiao Ling and I are inseparable to the death, we have been like that since we were little.”

Qin Shubao nodded and said, “Let’s make two groups then!” Pointing to the plains below, he said, “If she wants to capture us alive, she will have to find our track first. I will run toward the plains first, you two stay here from this high point to observe, see what method that stinky woman will use to follow my trail. If we

know her method, we can run away from her.”

Knitting his brows, Xu Ziling asked, “But you will be far away by then, how are we going to notify you?”

Qin Shubao took out a small copper mirror from his pocket; handing it over to the two boys, he said, “This is how we communicate by reflecting sunlight, same as using signal lantern during the night.” And then he taught the two boys how to use it. “Three days later,” he continued, “We’ll meet again at Pengcheng’s eastern gate. If we really can beat that woman, we, three brothers, will have a big his granny’s feast, and won’t go home before we get drunk.”

Amidst his loud laughter, he ran down the hill.

The two boys concentrated their attention to watch Qin Shubao as he ran farther and farther away, while also looked around to see if there was any sign of the enemy.

Who would have thought that until Qin Shubao has turned into a small dot at the edge of the plains, they still did not even see half a shadow of other human beings?

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Turns out that beautiful woman was only letting out an empty tiger roar!”

Xu Ziling also felt relieved, “Don’t you need to relay the good news?” he reminded him.

With an air of complacency Kou Zhong aimed the mirror toward the sun and made some signals.

On the other side, Qin Shubao tarried for half a day before continuing his escape, disappearing out of their sight.

“There ought to be three more sichen before dark,” Kou Zhong said, “We’d better to back to the river to find a way to Pengcheng. This move should be outside that Shen woman’s expectation.”

“In my opinion,” Xu Ziling said, “We should go to the highest mountain and hide there for his mother’s three days and three nights. If we see somebody’s coming, we can make out getaway; that will be a better idea.”

Kou Zhong shook his head, “Don’t forget that our peerless qinggong has not been trained to perfection,” he said, “I don’t think we can outrun that woman. Therefore, we must to go a place like Pengcheng, if that woman came, we’ll cry out along the street, ‘Wagang Army attacks!’ And then when the officers and men are dealing with her, we could easily get away.”

Xu Ziling thought that what he said was very reasonable; hence

he stayed silent and simply followed Kou Zhong running to River Si.

The two boys ran high and crouched low; they picked the less traveled wild, mountainous path, making a wide detour upstream of River Si, about thirty li away from the section of the river where they met Shen Luoyan.

Perhaps it was because of the chaos of war, but a very long time has passed before they saw boats sailing on the river. However, no matter how these two boys ‘threatened and bribed’, nobody was willing to stop their boat for them. They were not accustomed to climbing onto boats relying on force; hence they could only watch the river and sigh quietly.

After walking along the river for another sichen or so, ahead they saw a crossing pier, where a small fishing boat was moored, but they did not see anybody. In great delight the two boys rushed toward the boat.

Coming closer to the boat, they heard the sound of snoring coming from inside the boat’s canopy. The two boys looked inside and saw an old fisherman was sprawling on the deck, sleeping soundly.

Kou Zhong said, “If this is a trap, we can be considered losing with the most willing heart.”

Xu Ziling drew his long saber and chuckled evilly, "I won't believe that easily. This must be her man." And then he signaled Kou Zhong with his eyes.

Kou Zhong caught on; he also drew his saber and said with a cold laugh, "This is called I'd rather defeat people than have people defeat me." He jumped and charged into the shed, thrusting his saber toward the old fisherman's back.

But the saber stopped as soon as it touched the man's back.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and pulled his saber back; and then he signaled Xu Ziling that all is good.

Right this moment the snoring stopped, the old fisherman woke up with a start; with sleepy eyes he sat up. Before Kou Zhong could say anything to greet him, the old fisherman screamed in terror and scrambled out to the bow from the other end of the shed. "Help! Robbers!" he shouted. And then with trembling hands and shaking legs he crawled to ashore, and ran for his life.

Like a couple of stupid birds the two boys watched him disappearing into the forest by the shore. Kou Zhong said apologetically, "The Senior must have been visited by robbers before, no wonder his reaction was so intense."

Shrugging his shoulders, Xu Ziling said, “Most probably this fishing boat is his only possession, if he lose it to us, how would he make his living?”

Reluctantly Kou Zhong cast a couple of glances toward the fishing boat, and then he jumped ashore and said with a wry smile, “Then we must rely on our qinggong, which prowess shook the Wulin world.”

Halfheartedly the two boys left and continued their journey along the river. But they had been walking for only ten zhang or so, the old fisherman tiptoed out of the woods, trying to sneak back into the boat.

The two boys were overjoyed at this turn of events. “Laozhang [Sir, polite]!” Kou Zhong called out, “We are not robbers!”

The old fisherman jumped in fright; he dove straight toward the fishing boat, taking the last three steps in only two. Desperately he tried to untie the mooring rope.

By the time the two boys arrived, the old fisherman was still trying to untie the knot with ‘lost soul, dropped spirit’; but the more he pulled, the tighter the knot.

Kou Zhong squatted down at the pier; while helping him untie the knot, he said, “Laozhang! Look closely, do you think we look

like robbers?”

Apparently the old fisherman was not as scared as before; still panting, he replied with his hoarse voice, “Daye [big master, see my note on ‘ye’ earlier], why are you looking for me?”

Xu Ziling politely said, “Laozhang, where are you heading? If you are going upstream, would it be possible for you to give us a ride?”

The old fisherman’s courage was boosted some more; he said, “You want a ride, then you must pay.”

Kou Zhong said awkwardly, “We don’t even have half a penny in our pockets. Laozhang, would it be possible for you to give us a favor?”

The old fisherman frowned. “Where are you going anyway?” he asked.

Xu Ziling probed, “It would be best if we can go to Pengcheng. But it depends on whether it is convenient for Laozhang to do so.”

“That won’t do!” the old fisherman said, “To go to Pengcheng, we need at least one day. How could I have time to fish then? If there is no money involved, I won’t do it.”

And then, squinting his eyes, he sized them up for a while before he said with a laugh, “How about this: those two sabers you have may be sold for a few taels. Just those to Laohan [old man, referring to self] as boat fare!”

Kou Zhong was cross, “What do you mean a few taels? Our sabers are highest quality goods ...”

The old fisherman impatiently cut him off, “You don’t agree then forget about it. Laohan needs to set sail now.”

Xu Ziling pulled Kou Zhong aside and spoke in low voice, “There is something wrong here. This old man [laotou, slang] could be really Shen Luoyan’s man; otherwise, how come he is not afraid that from feeling awkward, we may get angry, and thus resort to violence against him? Also, why would he want to get our weapons?”

Kou Zhong nodded, “We need to test him,” he said, “If there is no problem, we can give the sabers to him; we can always snatch two more in the future, it’s not a big deal.”

Finished speaking, he turned toward the old fisherman and waved his hand, “We don’t need ride from you. Laozhang, please!”

The old fisherman grumbled a couple sentences, and then, ignoring the two boys, he steered the boat away from the pier.

The two boys' suspicion was gone. Leaping over the water surface, they landed on the fishing boat. The old fisherman was so scared that his face and lips turned pale, and he was unable to even cry.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Laozhang, did not misunderstand at all, it's just that we suddenly want to make a deal with you. When we get to Pengcheng, these two sabers will be yours."

The old fisherman breathed a sigh of relief, "I don't want your sabers anymore," he said, "When we get to Qinglong Tan [azure dragon beach], you help me throwing the net to catch fish, and then we go to Pengcheng to deliver the goods. Just consider that as your boat ride fare."

The boat slowed down. The old fisherman ordered Xu Ziling to row at the stern, and told Kou Zhong to grab the pole; he said nervously, "After the bend ahead is the 'Guishi Xia' [ghost rock gorge], the stream is rapid, each time Laohan blast through, I am always very scared and on edge. That's why although I know Qinglong Beach has the most fish, I would not dare to go there without any reason."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling turned their gaze forward; they saw

from here on, the cliffs on both sides of river gradually grew taller and the river narrower, the terrain was indeed very dangerous. At the same time they were thinking that if there were an ambush here, it would be really bad. Hastily they focused their attention to steer the boat, as well as paying close attention to any sound of activity on both shores.

The fishing boat advanced bravely against the current. After turning a sharp bend, they saw the cliff suddenly narrowed, the river flowed faster; close to the shore there were hundreds and thousands of rocks, in all shapes and sizes, protruding above the water, making the water flowed even more like an unbridled horse running freely on the plains: harsh, powerful, rapid, and nasty; dashing against the boat, sending it swaying to the left and rolling to the right. The water surface was white with bubbles, frightening them to the core.

The three people worked together with all their heart. At the stern, Xu Ziling rowed and steered the boat, Kou Zhong used the long pole to push the boat away from the rocks, while the old fisherman controlled the sail to maintain the proper course.

The fishing boat forged ahead with great difficulty.

As they turned another bend, the fishing boat suddenly leaned toward a boulder near the left bank. Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Look at me!” Leaping to the bow, he pushed the long

pole forward forcefully on the rock.

It was not clear whether it was because they were somehow caught in the current, or because Kou Zhong had used too much force, the bow of the boat swayed to the right, so that the boat was horizontally across the river, and then the hull continued to lean sideways to the right.

Water immediately gushed into the cabin, the boat suddenly capsized to the right.

By the time the three people cried out in fear, they were already in the water. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were not afraid of the ocean, naturally they did not fear this trivial River Si. When they had their heads out of the water, they saw the old fisherman, who seemed to be fainted, bobbing up and down on the surface, carried away by the current heading downstream.

In great shock the two boys swam desperately toward the old fisherman. Exerting their entire strength, soon they were able to catch up with the old fisherman, and grabbed him from left and right and pulled him up from the water.

While they were just breathing a sigh of relief, the old fisherman suddenly opened his eyes wide. The eyes shone with a frighteningly sharp ray. Just when the two boys realized something was wrong and cried out in shock, their bodies went

numb, because the old fisherman sealed the acupoints on their flanks.

The old fisherman roared in laughter. Dragging the two boys along as his captives, he swam toward the left bank.

After tossing the two boys to the bushes by the shore, the old fisherman's crooked, hunched back suddenly straightened up as he proudly said, "I am 'Old Man of the Plains' Mo Cheng, under Miss' order to capture the two Gongzi. Please! This time you only have three sichen to escape."

Finished speaking, he left with big laugh.

After recovering their strength, the two boys sat up and looked at each other with wry smile.

"It just does not make sense," Kou Zhong spoke painfully, "How could they track our whereabouts so clearly?"

Xu Ziling sighed and said, "That old fellow's disguise was really perfect."

Thinking hard, Kou Zhong said, "If we cannot decode their method of tracking us, sooner or later we will get captured again. If that happens, how can we live with our heads lifted high in the future?"

Xu Ziling looked around; he said in a low voice, “I wonder if Qin Shubao is as useless as we are?”

Kou Zhong retorted, “Shen Luoyan’s main target is Qin Shubao, naturally she will handle him personally; it would be more difficult for him to escape. Ay! Rack your brains, quick! Look! It’s getting dark really soon.”

Xu Ziling stared at the sinking sun on the horizon; he knitted his brow and said, “She must have put some trick on our bodies, so that she can easily catch up with us.”

The two boys were severely shaken; you looked at me, I looked at you, Kou Zhong slapped his thigh and said, “It must be that Lu Miaozi’s fishing net.”

And he examined his hand and feet and clothes, and sure enough, they discovered a lot of fine particles like dust all around their bodies. If they did not intentionally look for it, they would not detect it. By now the river has washed away most of the fine particles from their clothes, but a large amount of the particles still remained.

“Stop looking over it!” Xu Ziling warned him, “Maybe someone is still spying on us!”

“What kind of cheap trick is this?” Kou Zhong asked in terror, “I cannot brush it off! It is colorless and odorless. That beautiful woman is really formidable, she has clearly planned ahead to bet that she would capture us, that way she would win us over completely.”

Xu Ziling whispered in his ear, “Our clothes have been infected, we can take it off; but we can’t chop our head and limbs. What do we do this time? The enemy might come here soon.”

Kou Zhong used his nose to sniff around for quite a while, and then he said in low voice, “It does not matter whether this kind of powder has any scent or not, otherwise, even if the opponent can follow our trail based on scent, they can only follow our track from behind, unlike earlier, where they already laid up a trap ahead waiting for us.”

“We were really too careless,” Xu Ziling said in distress, “We were blind not to know that others put some kind of trick on our bodies. However, even if they sent people to keep watch on all vantage points around the two hundred li radius, they have to have a special way of seeing this fine powder on us both day and night. But if they want to prepare a trap one step ahead of us, they must have an unusually rapid and effective communication method. At night they can use flashing light, but how did they conceal it from us?”

Kou Zhong dejectedly lying down on the grass, looking up at the red sunset clouds in the sky; he muttered to himself, “There must be a hiccup in our conjecture somewhere. Remember when Qin Shubao left, we lived high and looked down on him all the time, but did not see the fine powder on his body. Supposing this fine powder can glow in the dark, you and I would be able to see it on each other’s body. Not only that, keeping watch on all high points around is both not easy and not practical. If we went into hiding deep in the mountains, this method does not have the least bit of usefulness. If as you just said, we fled to the highest peak, they don’t have the skill to monitor us. Therefore, that ‘Pretty Junshi’ [see last chapter, Book 3 Chapter 3] must have some other ingenious way, otherwise it won’t fit her fame in knowledge and scheming.”

Under pressure from Shen Luoyan, the two boys were forced to bring out their innate ability and wisdom as they vowed to fight to the end.

In fact, ever since they found the ‘Secret to Long Life’, their life has been turned upside down, as they constantly dealing with all kinds of challenges. Just like rough jade that is continuously carved and polished, it will gradually reveal its beautiful nature.

Xu Ziling lay next to Kou Zhong; he just saw a small blue bird hovering above, after circling twice, it flew to a nearby forest. He had a brainwave, “Perhaps this fine powder is not meant to be seen by human, but to be recognized by a trained bird, just like

falcons can help the hunter hunt their prey. So even if we cover ourselves with cloth, or hiding in a cave, we still cannot hide from the bird's eyes, because it has already identified us clearly."

Kou Zhong was jolted awake; he sat up, looked around, and said, "You are right, that is the most reasonable explanation. Just now there was a single, strange bird flying back and forth above us. His mother, let me hit it down and eat it to accompany wine."

Xu Ziling let out a hollow laugh, "I am afraid even if you hit it down now, it would be useless. Based on Shen Luoyan's ability and wisdom, she would guess that we have defeated her trick. Don't forget that that old fellow also touched us; perhaps he did another trick on us. If we, like a fool, exhausted our strength dealing with that double-flat feathered animal, it will only make that beautiful woman broke down in laughter."

Kou Zhong sized Xu Ziling up with rapt attention, and then scratching his head he said, "Normally, in terms of crafty ideas, even if you, this kid, pat your horse's bottom, you won't be able to catch up with laozi. Who could have thought that under present circumstances, your thought is more meticulous than me, Zhong Shao. Xu Junshi Daren [see Book 1 Chapter 4 on 'daren'], what are we supposed to do now?"

Xu Ziling also sat up and whispered in his ear, "This time we must not lose against that woman. Speaking about tracking, they

must use people or animal, two routes. But no matter how formidable that stinky woman is, or that her subordinates' qinggong is a hundred times better than ours, they still do not know that we can come and go freely underwater without taking a breath."

Kou Zhong nodded. "If we hide underwater," he said, "Unless that bird can fly underwater too, we can completely disappear without a trace. Ay! But from here to Pengcheng, there is still about thirty li of waterway; if we have to swim to Pengcheng, we will die of exhaustion."

Xu Ziling let out a low chuckle and said, "How did you, Zhong Shao, become so stupid? When we hide underwater, as long as there is a boat passing by, we can attach ourselves to the bottom of the boat. This way we can have a boat ride without expending a great deal of effort."

Kou Zhong slapped his thigh and let out a muffled cheer.

By this time the sky has turned dark, the two boys screamed gleefully as they sprang up, dashed madly along the shore first, and then when they reached a thick wooded area, they dove into the river; and then following the current, they swam quickly downstream, even farther away from Pengcheng.

As expected, the strange bird suddenly appeared from who

knows where. After making several circles in the air above the river, it let out a chirp, and soared into the air; soon it disappeared from sight.

At this point three big, five-mast ships appeared from the lower reaches of the river. The two boys were greatly delighted. They swam up and attached themselves to the hull of one of the ships.

Soon after the boys left, three men, including that 'Old Man of the Plains' Mo Cheng, darted out of the woods. When they got to the place where the two boys disappeared into the water, they scanned the river course with their shining eyes. Naturally they did not know that the two boys could get away in this unimaginable way.

It must be noted that even Wulin experts with superb water skill, although they knew some kind of breathing underwater skill, they could not stay underwater for this long. As for Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, who had innate ability to hold their breath and were able to stay underwater for a long time, they could be compared to first-rate characters of Du Fuwei, Yuwen Huaji, Zhai Rang and the other prominent figures' caliber.

This was the unique trait of 'Secret to Long Life'; when practiced, one would nearly suffer fire deviation, however, if the practitioner succeeded, it would unleash the most-advanced breathing regimen, which belonged to first-class mysterious skill

category, merely using different routes to the same destination.

Therefore, although in terms of martial art and lightness skill their standing was only a tad above average Wulin experts, their mental cultivation[1] was at the grandmaster level; which became a substantial and solid foundation for their growth.

This time Shen Luoyan miscalculated; it really had nothing to do with her ability and wisdom, but because the situation was simply too surreal.

Mo Cheng and the others were searching along the river when they saw the three huge ships sailing upstream; they abruptly halted their steps to watch.

When the ships had passed far away, Mo Cheng's expression turned extremely grave as he spoke to the other two in low voice, "Those three ships bear the flag of the Li Clan. If the Clan Leader, Li Yuan is aboard the ship, something really big is going to happen at Pengcheng. We must return immediately and report this to Miss."

Finished speaking, the three men disappeared into the darkness of the river bank.

[1] Orig. xin fa, lit. heart/mind method/way. I have difficulty

finding a good translation; any ideas?

Book 3 Chapter 5 – One Business Deal

One after another Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling appeared out of the water, breathing the late night fresh and clean air of River Si.

Without even exerting any strength, the hollow of their palms automatically produced suction force, attaching their bodies onto the wall of the ship; they did not even understand how it worked.

Immensely proud of himself, Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "This time we dealt a big blow to that Shen woman [reminder, the term 'woman' here is derogatory] that she fell flat on his granny's face. Ha! It's actually Shen woman's granny." [Translator's note: 'his granny' was a cuss word, equivalent to 'd@mn it'.]

"Don't be complacent too soon," Xu Ziling said, "There's still half a day before we can be considered winning this bet. Excessive complacency may cause hundreds of foolish negligence, don't ruin the enterprise for the sake of one basketful."

Kou Zhong nodded, "We'll act properly. Ay! We are so stupid, when we made the bet, she only spoke about what we'd do if she won, but not if we won. Otherwise, stroking her body a couple times won't be too bad."

Xu Ziling chuckled softly and said, "Less wishful thinking! This woman is full of thorns from top to bottom; she must not be touched. Ay! I am worried that Qin Laoge cannot deal with her!"

"That would be better," Kou Zhong replied, "Otherwise, I am afraid he would

be beheaded by that muddle-headed ruler. Hey! These three ships seem to be prominent; will you be interested in borrowing a couple of clothes and perhaps some food and money? It is better than looking like beggars wearing worn-out clothes with nothing in our hands.”

“Be careful!” Xu Ziling said in low voice, “The people who can use such three big ships must be either large and influential family of high standing, or high ranking official and nobility, or perhaps big shots gangster boss. If we are not careful, we would just offer our little lives to the Heaven.”

Kou Zhong frowned, “So are we going or not?” he asked.

Xu Ziling chuckled softly, “If we are not afraid of the Ol’ Die, why should we fear anybody? Follow me, the future Wulin expert!” Finished speaking, he crawled up along the wall.

By this time the two boys already had considerable experience in hiding and concealing their track, in breathing with their mouth and nose shut, in exercising restraint to their bodily functions, so that when being cautious, they were completely noiseless and undetectable.

There were wind lanterns on the deck, as well as hanging from the masts of the big ship, but on the side facing them, from twenty-something cabin windows on three levels, only about half were illuminated.

Xu Ziling selected a dark window on the second level from which he wanted to crawl into the ship. But as they passed an illuminated window, they heard a female voice coming from the inside. The two boys succumbed to their curiosity and stopped to listen.

The female voice suddenly sounded very close to the boys’ ears, “Er Ge [second (older) brother], it would be best if you stop persuading Die; he has always been loyal and devoted to the imperial court. Duan Shu [paternal (younger) uncle] has advised him for a long time, but did he even listen to half a word he said?”

The two boys jumped in fright; they had just realized that the dainty woman

was moving to the window, hence they did not dare to make the slightest move.

A distressed-sounding young male voice responded, “What Die reluctant to part the most is our relationship with the Dugu Clan; but he did not know that Dugu Feng is a wily old fox, who regards us as the thorn in his eyes. Right now the world is in chaos, tens of thousands people are angry, while the Tujue [Turkic] people are glaring at us like a tiger watching his prey, and Sui imperial court is no longer viable. And we get hold of Taiyuan, our troops are sufficient, our provisions abundant, enough to last us ten or eight years. Right now Yingyang Pai’s Liu Wuzhuo and Liang Shidu are aligning themselves with the Tujue, raising their troops to fight the Sui, taking over Loulan and Dingxiang, one after another. If they break through Yan Men [lit. wild goose gate], our Taiyuan will bear the brunt. If Die keeps wavering, ultimately we will be implicated by that muddle-headed ruler; the boat capsize, the people perish.”

Listening to this, the two boys outside the window sucked in a mouthful of cold air; who exactly were these man and woman inside? Whose children were they? Unexpectedly they were directly related to the Dugu Clan and Emperor Yang of Sui. Terrified, they did not dare to budge even more.

The man’s voice was full of authority and power; needless to say, he must be a top quality martial art expert.

The woman spoke in soft voice, “Have you talked it over with Dage [big/first (older) brother]?”

“I don’t know how many times,” the man replied, “He can’t think of any idea either. Xiuning should know how horrible Die’s stubbornness is.”

That Xiuning said, “We’d better confide with Madame Dong Ming; father always listen to everything she said. Ay! If only Niang came back to life; Die would definitely listen to her.”

The two boys outside were so terrified that their hands slipped and they almost fell into the river. Finally they were able to guess that the ship they were climbing actually belonged to the Li Clan; how could they dare to continue eavesdropping? Hastily and quietly they continued pulling themselves up.

Right this moment the conversation inside the cabin suddenly stopped. But the two boys did not pay attention anymore.

They opened the window, and after ascertaining there was nobody inside, they crawled in, and only then did they dare to breathe a sigh of relief.

The two boys swept the room with their gaze, and noticed that it was a fairly large room, the furnishing was gorgeous. Other than bed, chairs and other furniture, there was also a large wooden chest; inside there should be clothes and that sort of thing.

Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "We ought to steal with principle; each person should only get a set of clothes, and if we find money, we should also take only enough to cover our meals for several days and one visit to the pleasure house."

At this point a man's head appeared on the window, but when he heard Kou Zhong, the head suddenly disappeared again.

Xu Ziling spoke in a low voice, "I have never imagined that we would steal Li Yuan's belongings. Didn't that Dugu fellow want to harm Li Yuan? We'd better harm him instead. Let's leave a brief note warning the Li Clan people, just consider it payment for the stuff we steal." [Reminder: Li Yuan was the personal name of first Tang emperor Gaozu (566-635), reigned 618-626.]

Kou Zhong chuckled quietly and said, "Since when did you become this conscientious? Ha! Perhaps in all the world, we are the only one who have the ability to cause Li Yuan to revolt. But I don't know whether this guy is a good guy or a bad guy ..."

"Don't talk nonsense," Xu Ziling scolded him, "If somebody's coming we will be in trouble. Quickly steal!"

The two boys walked over to the chest and were about to lift the lid, suddenly there was a 'shush!' from the window, as if it was warning the two boys not to make any noise.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were scared out of their wits. They froze and turned their heads toward the window.

A dark shadow noiselessly came in through the window and stood in front of the two boys.

The two boys calmed their nerves and looked closely. Turned out it was a tall young man that looked only a few years older than they were, with a rectangular face and big ears, with formidable physique and eyes that shone like glossy lacquer, and elegant bearing. Right now he was standing proudly yet self-composed, a demeanor that could stop deep pool and overcome high mountain peak; that could turn other people's heart upside down.

While Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were as dumb as a wooden chicken, the young man spoke in low voice, "Zaixia [I, humble] Shimin, the third son of Li Yuan, the caretaker of Taiyuan. Two Xiongtai [brother, of the same age] look just, honest and amazing, I wonder what are your respected surname and great given names?"

The two boys exchanged a glance; their heart has calmed down, but at the same time they felt at a loss. This man has caught the two little thieves red-handed, yet he was still this refined and courteous, as if the two of them were 'noble guests' whose appearance was simply unexpected.

The two boys stood up. Kou Zhong cupped his fist to show his respect, and said with a giggle, "This name 'Shimin' is very good. Ha! Saving the world, coming to the relief of the people [jiu shi ji min, same 'shi' and 'min' characters]; perhaps in the future you will become the emperor."

Li Shimin smiled indifferently and said, "Xiongtai needs not praise Zaixia; but this name indeed has a little bit of background. Why don't you two gentlemen have a seat so that we can talk?" [Another reminder (because I think I already had the footnote somewhere): Li Shimin, personal name of second Tang emperor Taizong (599-649), reigned 626-649.]

This moment Li Xiuning's voice came from below, "Er Ge! What happened?"

Li Shimin leaned over the window and called out, "I'll tell you later!"

Turning around, he asked the two boys to have a seat; his manner was sincere and courteous. Deep in their heart the two boys knew his intention, but they also knew that they could not charge through him toward the window. Therefore, bracing themselves, they sat down in two armchairs leaning against the wall. Because their body was still dripping wet, it was quite uncomfortable.

Li Shimin calmly smiled and sat down on a chair next to the window; he said, "When Zi Xia was four, a man who was good in physiognomy came to our home; by reading my facial features, he predicted that 'by age twenty, you will relieve the world [shi] and pacify the people [min]'. That time Niang doted on me very much, hence she changed my name to 'Shimin'." While speaking, he casually picked up the flint to light up the oil lamp on a small table by his side.

Xu Ziling noticed that when he mentioned his mother, his eyes revealed a fondness of a child's deep admiration toward his mother; he could not help thinking about Fu Junchuo. Sighing, he said, "You must miss your Niang very much."

Li Shimin nodded slightly; turning his attention to the water droplets on the floor dripping from the two boys' body, he said with a deep voice, "What is the relationship between the two gentlemen and Shan Mei Xianzi Madame Dong Ming of Ryukyu? Why did when you heard her name your hearts jump a few times? Otherwise, Zaixia would still be in the dark as to the two gentlemen have sneaked into our ship."

It was only then did the two boys realize what went wrong. They were also astonished at Li Shimin's thorough thought process; that just from this point he was able to deduce that the two of them were somehow related to Madame Dong Ming.

Kou Zhong giggled and replied, "Naturally we are related! But we'd better make a business deal; supposing we can make your respected Ol' Die to raise arms and rebel, you will give us, two brothers, two sets of clothes and ... hey! And two, no! Thirty taels of silver. Ha! What do you say?"

This time it was Li Shimin who was dumbstruck. “Thirty taels of silver?” he asked in incredulity.

Xu Zilings heart skipped a beat, he hastily tried to remedy the situation by saying, “If thirty taels of silver is too much, twenty-five is alright.”

Li Shimin looked at the two boys in disbelief; he reached into his pocket, took out a money purse and without even looking at it he tossed it to Kou Zhong. “Just look how much money is in there,” he said.

Kou Zhong caught the purse, and opened it without hesitation. As soon as he looked inside, he gasped, “My grandma, old dad, and all my ancestors!” he exclaimed, “It’s his mother’s gold ingots!”

Hastily Xu Ziling craned his neck to look. He was speechless. “It worth at least several hundred taels of silver,” he said.

Kou Zhong’s eyes lit up; he stuffed the purse into his pocket. Taking a deep breath he said, “Taking people’s money, we’ll avoid calamities on their behalf; the two of us brothers will take full responsibility of this matter.”

Xu Ziling had a bit more conscience. “Zhong Shao,” he said apologetically, “You must return the money first, we have to wait until the business is done before we can receive the payment.”

Li Shimin shrugged him off, “Take it! Whether success or failure, we can all be friends. That money should be enough for you to stroll into low-grade brothel a hundred times over.”

The two boys were touched. Kou Zhong raised his thumb in praise, “We accept your friendship.”

“Not too loud,” Li Shimin said in low voice, “I don’t want others to know that you are here.”

Kou Zhong’s thick face blushed; he lowered his voice to the lowest volume and

said, “Let me tell you an astonishingly big secret! Madame Dong Ming kept an account book in her residence listing the purchase of weapons your Old Die made in secret to her, on it there is his signature and stamp too. Just imagine if this treasure is stolen, what would happen then?”

Li Shimin was shaken. Naturally he knew that these two boys did not invent some crazy talk. Because the reason that he took his troops to Pengcheng this time was to place another order to Madame Dong Ming for another batch of weapons.

Since two years ago his father, Li Yuan, was transferred to Hong Hua to be its caretaker, while at the same time he was assigned to be the Junshi [military advisor] of Guan You’s thirteen counties. To deal with Yang Xuan’gan’s main forces, Li Yuan finally accepted his advice to buy a large quantity of weapons from Madame Dong Ming. This matter was outside Emperor Yang of Sui’s knowledge; if it leaked, and there was credible evidence, the paranoid Emperor Yang of Sui would certainly suspect him of planning a rebellion. If not, it would be a fantastic story indeed.

After staring blankly for half a day, Li Shimin frowned and said, “Madame Dong Ming has several martial art masters under her command, each one of the four law protector fairies has ultimate skill. Other than ‘Shan Ren’ Ning Daoqi [see Book 1 Chapter 6] personally made the move, who would be able to come aboard their ship to steal such an important thing?”

Xu Ziling laughed and said, “Seeing that you are such a true friend, we can tell you a secret; but you must not harm us like other people, or perhaps when this business is done use some trick against us.”

Li Shimin seriously said, “If I, Li Shimin, commit any despicable act, let me not die a good death. Humph! You dare to look at me that way.”

As if nothing had happened, Kou Zhong said, “It is called ‘once bitten by a snake’. It is also called ‘being careful sailing on ten-thousand-year ship’. We must establish trust with each other first, only then will any large-scale plan be effective.”

It was obvious that Li Shimin thought that between the two, Kou Zhong was comparatively the dishonest one. He turned to Xu Ziling and said, "You will tell me!"

Right that moment someone was passing through outside. After the sound of footsteps was gone, Xu Ziling asked, "Whose room is this?"

Li Shimin laughed. "It's mine," he replied, "The deck below is used by the womenfolk. If you want to steal clothes, you have come to the right place. Our builds are similar."

The two boys were amused.

Thereupon Xu Ziling narrated the story around Haisha Bang's desire to attack Dong Ming Pai's flagship. When Li Shimin heard that Yuwen Huaji and Dugu Ce were involved, his eyes flickered with cold ray, his imposing aura radiated all around.

"Therefore," Kou Zhong summed up, "Right now only the two of us can mingle aboard the ship. Besides, they thought that our martial art skill is low, hence they do not guard against us so much. Of course, we will be very secretive, so that we won't let Laoxiong's [old chap] money down."

Li Shimin was already accustomed to the way he tooted his horn, he did not even bother whether they would be secretive or not. After thinking hard, he said, "What can we do to lure Madame Dong Ming someplace else? This is something that I have to think about."

Finished speaking he stood up, opened the chest and took out two sets of clothes, and handed them over to the two boys, "Change into dry clothes first, and after a good night sleep, I will wake you up when we arrive at Pengcheng by daybreak. I need to go to the lower level and have some talk with my sister."

"We can sleep on the floor," Kou Zhong offered.

Li Shimin laughed and said, "Such a big bed, enough for three people to sleep,

why sleep on the floor? Are we not only business partners, but brothers and friends as well? Ha! Your encounter is so bizarre that it is hard to believe.”

Finished speaking he went out through the window again.

When the two boys stepped into Pengcheng, they were rather hesitant, but were full of good feeling. What they were wearing was clean and tidy warrior outfit, on their waist hung highest quality steel saber and a full money pouch given by Li Shimin. Ever since they came out of their mother’s womb, they had never looked so grand like this.

Xu Ziling was tall and straight, scholarly and elegant. On the other hand, Kou Zhong looked bold and powerful, with a heroic and imposing aura around him.

The two boys walked side by side. From time to time people shot them admiring and envious look.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and pulled Xu Ziling’s elbow, “What we need right now is a pair of steeds and a dozen or so footmen, otherwise we can go to a low-grade brothel first and acting like young tycoons.”

Xu Ziling cheerfully said, “Visiting low-grade brothel is an essential program for tonight, but right now we need to find a wine shop. Bug bowl of wine, big piece of meat, we’ll have a his-granny’s good time, while casually discuss how we are going to proceed in this business deal. We have received other people’s money, naturally we must do something for him.”

Kou Zhong took a surreptitious look around, examining the façade of the restaurants lining up both sides of the main street. “I did not expect Pengcheng to be this thriving and lively,” he said, “The strangest thing is, there does not seem to be any refugee around. Look! Those of elder sisters are so pretty. Ha!”

Xu Ziling looked around and saw Kou Zhong was staring at a group of young women walking directly toward them, with what he thought was the most attractive smile he could muster. Amazingly, the group of young women did not try to avoid the two boys’ stare; they smiled back at them with even more attractive smile.

It was the first time ever that the two boys received such courtesy. After the group of young women walked passed, they squealed in delight and entered a restaurant on their right that looked like a rather upscale restaurant.

With their appearance, weaponry and attire, as soon as the two boys set foot on the second floor, the waiters greeted them attentively, and called them 'Gongzi this' and 'Gongzi that' as they led them to a table by the window facing the street. At this time from about a dozen tables on the second floor, more than half had guests sitting on them.

Kou Zhong generously tipped the waiter while ordering food and drink. He said excitedly, "Those sweet girls just now have a rather high nose, their eyes are big and blue; they must be Hu women [non-Han people, esp. from central Asia]. I heard that they are licentious by nature, very easy to get our hands on them. Ha! Perhaps this time we don't need to visit a low-grade brothel."

Xu Ziling was worried, "Why did you order that much wine? Two catties? Can you drink wine? I can only drink a little bit."

Kou Zhong reached out to grab Xu Ziling's shoulder. "Life is short, make merry while you can!" he said, "From two marketplace ruffians in Yangzhou, we now become big shots in Wulin world. With this kind of encounter, we have nothing to complain to Laotianye; how can you not enjoy it with cheerful heart?"

With his other hand he beckoned Xu Ziling to look out the window at the endless stream of horses and carriages on the street below; he sighed and said, "Look! This is such a beautiful world. Meeting this kind of fine time, beautiful scenery, we ought to welcome it with a bit of wine and celebrate. You drink one catty, I drink one catty. Whoever does not get drunk will be considered a hero."

Following his gaze, Xu Ziling also stared blankly at the street. He remembered Fu Junchuo, he remembered Li Jing and Susu, his heart was overwhelmed with an indescribable feeling. "Alright," he nodded and said, "One catty it is."

Kou Zhong suddenly lowered his voice, "On the table to the left, there is a handsome guy who keeps looking at you; I think he prefers male to female."

Startled, Xu Ziling turned to look. Sure enough, on a large table by the stairs, about three, four tables away, sat three men. One of them wore a dark green scholar robe, and was exceptionally handsome; he was sizing the two boys up. When he noticed that Xu Ziling was staring at him, he nodded and smiled.

Remembering what Kou Zhong had just said, Xu Ziling was startled; hastily he averted his gaze and said in low voice, "He seems to recognize us. Maybe it's another trap of Shen Luoyan. Don't forget that the deadline for that woman's three-day bet is still tonight!"

Kou Zhong nodded. "I almost forget," he said, "Did you see his throat?"

Xu Ziling was taken aback, "Is it any good?" he asked.

Kou Zhong stroked his own adam's apple and said with a low chuckle, "That guy cannot be more handsome than that, plus he does not have this thing that we have; what do you say he is?"

Horried, Xu Ziling gasped, "Not Shen Luoyan in disguise!"

"It doesn't seem like it," Kou Zhong replied, "Oh no! She came over."

Shocked, Xu Ziling turned around. The woman who disguised herself as a scholar was already standing by their table. Her feature that was particularly impressive, other than her 'handsome' face, which was adorned with a pair of big, bright and lively eyes, was her pair of long legs, so that disguised as a man, she gave other people some kind of tall and straight impression.

While the two boys were staring at her in surprise, she revealed a faint nonchalant smile as she cupped her fist and spoke in deeper voice, "Across five lakes and four oceans are brothers, two Xiongtai carried an extraordinary look; I wonder what are your honorable surname and great given names, so that I, Li Zhi, can make friends with you."

Kou Zhong giggled and said, "I am Zhang San, he is Li Si[1]. If across five lakes

and four oceans are really brothers, there won't be people everywhere running away for their lives. Handsome Xiongtai, please return to your seat!"

[1] 'Zhang the third' and 'Li the fourth' are equivalent to 'Tom, Dick and Harry' in western world. The third name is 'Wang Wu' (Wang the fifth).

Since he suspected that the other party was Shen Luoyan's second trap, he flatly turned her down.

Xu Ziling took this opportunity to look at 'Li Zhi's' two companions; he saw that they were 'genuine goods at fair prices': real, tough looking men. Their eyes gleaming with vigor and they had swords hanging on their waist; all in all, they smelled like bodyguards.

Obviously Li Zhi was quite shocked that Kou Zhong was treating her like that; her pretty face alternated between red and white, her phoenix eyes turned cold. She looked like she wanted to turn around and leave, but could not let it go.

After giving Kou Zhong a hateful glare, she turned to Xu Ziling and said, "You are Li Si? I ..."

Xu Ziling simply cut her off, "I am definitely Li Si. Miss is flirting openly in such a public place, don't you have any shame?"

'Li Zhi' was visibly shaken, her 'beautiful eyes' shot a thick murderous aura, yet her 'jade countenance' stayed surprisingly calm. The two boys thought, 'Here it comes,' their hands immediately grabbed the hilt of their saber. They were even more convinced that she was Shen Luoyan's people.

Suddenly Li Zhi seemed to be able to regain her self-control, her eyes calmed down as she said in low voice, "You'd better remember what you said to me."

Finished speaking, she brushed her sleeve and walked down the stairs. In a flurry the two middle-aged men paid the bill and ran after her.

By the time the three people left, their food and drink were delivered; the two boys forgot everything about Li Zhi, they simply bent over the table and chewing busily.

Cups came and cups went, very soon the two boys started to feel tipsy, and then they entered the world of the drunkards.

Holding a cup of wine with both hands Kou Zhong giggled drunkenly and said, "The first cup tasted pungent and difficult to drink, but the second cup turned into exquisite elixir; ha! I did not know wine is such a good drink."

Xu Ziling looked at the more than half a cup strong wine still remained, he surrendered, "A little tipsy feeling is enough; perhaps as soon as we step out of this wine shop Shen Luoyan will prepare a trap for us. Ay! Right now I only want to sleep. Last night that Li Shimin guy had his leg pressed on my side that I could not sleep well."

Kou Zhong pressed his hand against Xu Ziling's forehead, he drunkenly whispered in his ear, "It would be better to go straight into the biggest pleasure house, find two most popular aunties to accompany us sleeping. This is called 'today has wine, today get drunk' [i.e. live in the moment, carpe diem]. Come! Call the waiter, have him tell us all the detailed information about this pleasure house."

Xu Ziling nodded happily. He was about to call the waiter, when suddenly one of the two men sitting on the next table raised his voice a little bit, "Zhang Xiong, you came to visit our Pengcheng, but if have never visited Yihong Courtyard, and have never seen that place's most popular aunties, Baiyun [white cloud] and Qiuyan [autumn swallow], how can you be considered ever visiting Pengcheng?" [Translator's note: at first I thought Kou and Xu mentioned 'auntie' (lit. paternal aunt) because the women were older than they were, but this man also said 'auntie', so perhaps the word refers to 'prostitute'?]

The two boys thought 'what a great coincidence'; hurriedly they focused their attention to eavesdrop.

The other man replied, “Is Chen Xiong referring to the Yihong Courtyard that is at the corner of the street as you turned left from this street? How could I never come there? It’s just that now it is still daytime, the misses are still asleep; let’s talk about it again tonight! Ha! Those girls are so pretty that I am drooling already.”

The one surnamed Chen laughed and said, “Right now it’s still wu hour [noon, 11am-1pm], Yihong Courtyard is not open to receive guests. Let us drink two more cups and then take a stroll around!”

Hearing this, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were delighted; they kicked each other’s leg under the table, and decided right then and there that today would be the day they have a taste of women.

For young men their age, what could be more interesting than the mystery of the opposite sex? What could move their heart even more?

Book 3 Chapter 6 – Escape From Dangerous Spot

As the two boys stepped out of the restaurant, autumn breeze blew, increasing their tipsiness by two degrees. Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling in the Yihong Yuan direction.

After walking for about a dozen steps, he said in low voice, “Something does not seem right, those two men’s conversation seemed to be too timely, as if they were afraid we would not know how to get to Yihong Yuan and thus have to spell out everything clearly. In my opinion, those two men must be Shen Luoyan’s people. As she saw one trap failed, she came up with another trap.”

Xu Ziling was just staring at the hustle and bustle of horses and carriages struggling for the right of way on the street with his drunken eyes; hearing Kou Zhong, he was startled and said, “You are right. Since Li Zhi could be Shen Luoyan’s people, those two men might be her people as well. Ay! Where should we go then? It would be best if we can find a place we can hide.”

With unbearable itch in his heart Kou Zhong said, “If we don’t go to Yihong, we should go to Yilu [yi hong – relying/riding on red, yi lu – relying on green. Yuan means ‘Courtyard’].”

Suddenly they came face to face with another passerby; Kou Zhong respectfully asked, “Excuse me Uncle, around here, other than Yihong Yuan, is there any other most upscale pleasure house with the biggest number of pretty girls?”

The person he stopped happened to be a middle-aged scholar; hearing the question, a look of disdain appeared on his face. ‘Pei!’ he spat, and walked away.

Xu Ziling roared in laughter, “Are you asking where to go to take imperial examination?” he jested, “Asking for a pleasure house, you must ask twenty-something man, someone that with one look we can tell that he indulges excessively in wine and women. Watch me!”

Looking around, he happened to see a splendid-looking carriage stopping behind them, from which a young man with expensive-looking clothes alighted, followed by two attendants. The young man looked to be around twenty-three, twenty-four; attractive and intelligent, but his face looked rather unhealthy, as if he was too weak to stand up to the wind. He fit the exact criteria of the person Xu Ziling wanted to ‘ask’ for direction.

Kou Zhong gave Xu Ziling a sharp push that he stumbled two steps forward toward the rich-looking young man. The two attendants immediately had their hands pressed against the sword hilt with alert look on their eyes.

Bracing himself, Xu Ziling cupped his fist and said respectfully, “Respected Gongzi, Zaixia has something I’d like to inquire of you, would Gongzi please do not blame Zaixia for being rude.”

The young man looked at him up and down with interest; then he smiled and said, “Renxiong [dear friend], please speak.”

Embarrassed, Xu Ziling took a step forward. Afraid that other people might hear him, he spoke in the lowest voice possible, “We, two brothers, want to know: around here, other than Yihong Yuan, which pleasure house is the best?”

The young man was greatly surprised. Immediately a smile broke on his face from finding a ‘kindred spirit’; he sighed and said, “You have come to the right person. My Ol’ Die opens a brothel, it’s at the next street, Hong Yuan Street, Cuibi Lou [both ‘cui’ and ‘bi’ mean ‘green jade’, ‘lou’ is multi-story building]. In terms of scale and girls, Yihong Yuan cannot catch up even if they spur their horse. It’s just that right now it’s still too early, you can stroll around somewhere else, and come there after you hour [5-7pm]. Just tell them that you are my, Xiang Yushan’s friends, I guarantee that nobody will dare to serve you not satisfactorily.

Renxiong, please. I still have important matter I have to attend to.”

After Xiang Yushan left, the two boys felt as if they have obtained imperial edict. Bursting with joy, they walked along the street with arm around each other’s shoulder; surprisingly neither was singing at the top of his lungs.

All kinds of stores lined up both sides of the street, there were butcher shop, cake shop, dry goods store, clothing store, cosmetic store, fish shop, et cetera.

Due to the alcohol in their belly, the two boys felt as if the entire world had become unreal, but looking at the autumn sun high in the sky shining down its light to the flagstone street, the sparkling reflection seemed like fantastic rays of light. The street, the buildings, the passerby, the horses and carriages, seemed to synthesize into one perfect harmony, with no dividing line between distinct realms.

Kou Zhong involuntarily laughed; half of his body was leaning In Xu Ziling’s shoulder. With a sigh of contentment he said, “Right now I don’t want to join any militia army or government army. After killing Yuwen Huagu, we will focus on earning money, buying and selling goods, and when we have free time we just go to pleasure houses, getting drunk and passing through this life happy, and that’s about it.”

Xu Ziling did not drink as much as Kou Zhong did, so his brain was a bit clearer. “Didn’t you often say that you want to accomplish big thing in life?” he wondered, “Why all of a sudden you are thinking of being an unscrupulous businessman who make profit by speculation [the term used here is hoarding goods for speculation]?”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “Even becoming unscrupulous businessman, I, Zhong Shao, will become the best unscrupulous businessman. When I see other people suffer hardship, suffer calamity, will we forget chivalry by ‘throwing stones at those who fell down a well’? It’s just that honestly speaking, Beautiful Shifu was right: based on virtue and ability right now, how can we take care of other people’s business? Hey! When our martial art skill has reached perfection, when we finish training the Nine Mysteries Great Technique to the 108th level, then if we see anybody who is not pleasing to the eye, we can slaughter him with a slash of a saber. That will be called removing harm for the sake of the people.”

With a bitter laughter Xu Ziling said, “How can there be such a simple thing in the world? But no matter what, we must slaughter Yuwen Huaji, that treacherous bandit first.”

Suddenly a shadow flashed in front of them, a fragrant breeze wafted by. The two boys took a closer look, turned out it was a rather good-looking middle-aged woman blocking their way. With a ‘blossoming eyebrows and smiling eyes’ she said, “Are two

Gongzi lost? The Yihong Courtyard main gate is over there. We are just open for business. If two Gongzi become our first guest, our popular girls will definitely serve you with full attention.”

Following her pointing finger, they saw the big signboard of Yihong Courtyard was precisely behind them, to their left. They suddenly realized that in their muddled state, they had just walked past Yihong Courtyard’s main gate. This procuress that was ordered to wait for them got panicked and blocked their way to solicit business.

Since he was still a bit drunk, Kou Zhong leaned over to mercilessly leer over her towering breasts. And then he winked and laughed, “Pretty woman, tell that devious woman Shen Luoyan that we fell into her trap once, we won’t fall the second time. If she has guts, have her come and grab us. But don’t forget that she’s a felon wanted by the imperial court!”

While the procuress was stunned, the two boys walked away staggeringly, swaying left and right.

Kou Zhong shook Xu Ziling, who was asleep on the bed, to wake him up. In his excitement his voice was hoarse, as he nervously said, “It’s going to be your hour soon, we must be Cuibi Lou’s first guest; perhaps we’ll get a 50% discount!”

Xu Ziling’s head was still heavy; he crawled out of bed and

whined, “Drinking wine has this kind of after effect; if you are sent by that Shen woman, I would have been finished.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “I am the most responsible person on earth; otherwise, who’s going to keep watch for you? Just now there was a waiter coming asking a lot of questions, I would not open the door for him. Ha! Just several more sichen and that Shen woman will lose to us. I wonder what is Qin Laoge’s fate?”

Xu Ziling took his saber, which he hid behind his pillow. “Let’s go to the Eastern Gate to see if he left any secret mark there.”

And then he added, “Also, we must not forget that thing that we promised that guy Li Shimin.”

Kou Zhong impatiently said, “How could I forget? Didn’t that rich guy say that Dong Ming flagship wouldn’t be back from Luoyang until tomorrow? Let’s take advantage of the fine time, beautiful scenery tonight; let’s start without delay!”

Xu Ziling’s heart warmed up, “It’s funny that when we were in Yangzhou, when we looked inside from outside a brothel’s door, people always drive us out like beggars. But now even the brothel owner’s son recognizes us as shining treasure. But let me be clear first, on my first night [figuratively, first sexual encounter] I don’t want to pick randomly, at least it has to be as pretty as Qingqing, who ‘bite the hands that feeds her’, from Piao Xiang [floating

fragrance] Courtyard.”

Kou Zhong patted his money purse and said with a laugh, “With money naturally come face and prestige, coupled with Xiang Yushan’s support, whatever you, Ling Shao [young master Ling] wants, you will get it. If the lord is not satisfied, can’t we stick up our butts out of bed?”

Xu Ziling raised his qi to lighten his body; he just wanted to show off some nimble moves. Who would have thought that as soon as he rose up, he made a somersault and landed noiselessly on the floor?

The two boys were severely shocked; they looked at each other with an I-can’t-believe-that-just-happened look on their faces.

“Heavens!” Kou Zhong was stunned, “How did you do that?” he asked, “Can you do it again? How could you fly out from sitting position like that?”

Xu Ziling scratched his head, “I am afraid I cannot repeat it,” he said, “Why don’t you try it yourself?”

Previously, each time they raised their qi, they had to channel their strength to leap first, and borrowed the momentum to fly up. But to raise their qi from a still position like this, it had never happened before.

Kou Zhong stood still, his expression looked odd.

“Don’t you want to hurry up to the brothel?” Xu Ziling urged him, “Why haven’t you tried?”

Kou Zhong’s face turned beet red; he said in embarrassment, “I have tried it more than a dozen times, but my toes did not even move.”

Xu Ziling was silent for half a day; finally he said dejectedly, “This time I did not get enlightenment as well. Ay! Perhaps we should really do obeisance to a great shifu, so that when we have a problem like this we could get a brilliant master’s direction.”

Kou Zhong shook his head, “Doing obeisance to a shifu is a farting useless,” he said, “What we learn is the strange skill from the ‘Secret to Long Life’, nobody in the world is proficient in it, we can only rely on ourselves to grope around. Perhaps our problem is due to our virgin male bodies, because solitary yang cannot develop. Only after we break it will our martial art immediately achieve great success. Ha! It must be the case.”

Xu Ziling laughed and scolded him, “Less bullsh1t, will you? Aren’t you going to leave?”

Kou Zhong doubled up in laughter, “I am leaving! I am leaving!”

he said.

Staggering along, they walked toward the door. But as they opened the door, a sharp cold wind assaulted their foreheads. Without even thinking Kou Zhong raised his qi to lighten his body just like Xu Ziling did; his body flew backward.

The person who launched the sneak attack apparently did not expect that the attack should fail. “Huh?” he exclaimed, and fast as lightning he slipped into the room.

Just like Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling did not have time to think, he halted his step, pulled his saber, and swiftly hacked down on the attacker’s head; all in one fluid motion, without the slightest bit of hesitation or sluggishness. It was perhaps the most outstanding saber strike he had ever launched in all his life until today.

‘Bing!’ The attacker used the long golden hairpin in his hand to block Xu Ziling’s unmatched fierce saber strike head on.

For an instant both sides had to stop and were unable to launch any consecutive move.

‘Bang!’ Kou Zhong fell heavily on the bed, but he immediately shot out like a bullet and shouted, “Niang! I did it!”

The attacker pulled the hairpin back and withdrew from the

room, the sleeve of his clothes floated away, as beautiful as a fairy; who else but Li Mi's 'Pretty Junshi' Shen Luoyan?

Xu Ziling was shaken by her power and had to take two steps back. Seeing the door was no longer blocked, Shen Luoyan abruptly turned around and entered the room again, with the intention of pursuing and attacking Xu Ziling. But Kou Zhong already arrived; the flicker of his saber was like billowing waves, coupled with the surging gust of wind from the blade, as he violently attacked her.

Shen Luoyan cried out with her shrill voice as she rushed into the shadows of the saber, utilizing a close-combat technique. Successively she blocked a dozen or so moves from Kou Zhong. Each move was incomparable vicious; but she failed to push Kou Zhong back.

In the meantime, Xu Ziling pulled himself together [orig. reorganize flags and drums] and joined the melee. Without any choice Shen Luoyan was pushed back out of the room once again.

The two boys stood on guard inside the door, but their hearts were like great waves rolling into the sky, with bitter thought raging endlessly. They had never expected that such abrupt turn of events, they would be able to display the essence of 'Bloody Battle Ten Styles' vividly and thoroughly, so much so that they did not know which move they were using. They only felt that their

hands followed their hearts, their strength followed the saber technique, and everything was flowing without any restraint.

Shen Luoyan, on the other hand, was greatly shaken. Her ‘Soul-snatching Hairpin’ was the ultimate skill of her family, which has been passed down from generation to generation, and ranked quite high in the Jianghu’s ‘Amazing Skill Ultimate Art List’. In usual circumstances she very seldom used it; this time she was hoping to capture the two boys in one fell swoop. Who would have thought that these two boys were like ‘shedding their mortal bodies and exchanged their bones’, that twice she attacked, twice she was repelled back? If this matter spread in Jianghu, it would be sufficient to propel the two boys’ name to the top.

With a saber in his hand, Kou Zhong struck a pose and laughed aloud, “Beautiful Junshi, come in quickly to have a taste of my saber.”

Xu Ziling also imposingly said, “Just remember that you must not harm half a strand of our hair; otherwise you will definitely lose.”

Shen Luoyan nearly went mad from anger; with a furious laughter she said, “The courtyard outside is a bit bigger; come out and let’s try again.”

“Are you thinking of having your men to surround us?” Kou Zhong exposed her scheme, “Ha! You should know that I can do lion’s roar; with a loud shout, I guarantee all the government officials of Pengcheng will hear everything clearly.”

Shen Luoyan’s pretty face turned cold, but instantly a moving smile reappeared as she said in tender voice, “How about this? If I can crash through your barrier and enter the room, I will be considered the winner, then the two of you must surrender nicely to me.”

Calmly, Xu Ziling said, “That means you no longer have the confidence to capture us alive; ergo, you already lose!”

Kou Zhong’s fighting spirit was aroused, his confidence soared; immensely proud of himself he said, “What are we afraid of, but we have to set time limit. I will count to ten, and if you can’t pass, you lose.”

Shen Luoyan stuck the golden hairpin back to her hair; she laughed and said, “So be it. Start counting!” Finished speaking she walked toward the door in large strides.

While the two boys were stunned and were at a loss, she walked between them straight into the room without any obstruction at all. When she reached the bed, she turned around and leisurely sat down, looking at the two boys with a smile on

her face.

The two boys still had their sabers lifted high, but how could they hack on her just like that? Even until she turned around, they were still dumbfounded.

Looking at the two boys' weird expression, Shen Luoyan broke into giggle and clapped her hands, "Alright! I win!"

Dejectedly Xu Ziling put the saber back into its sheathe as he sighed and said, "I can't accept losing this way, because just like last time, you are exploiting our kind-heartedness."

Shen Luoyan pretended to be surprised, "Other than hacking people with your saber, don't you know any other way to subdue others?"

Kou Zhong put his saber down, he giggled and said, "We did not lose, because although you entered the room, you did not crash through our barrier. The word 'crash through' implied some fighting is involved!"

Shen Luoyan glanced at him with the corner of her eye; still with a smile on her face she said, "How about we sit down and talk? Wow! Now the two of you look pretty nice."

The two boys sat on the chairs leaning against the wall on her

left side. Looking straight at her alluring eyes that look just like limpid autumn lake, Kou Zhong said, "You want to talk, let's talk. We still want to visit the brothel!"

Shen Luoyan stared at him angrily, she said irately, "Do you not know that those girls in the brothel are really pitiful? Just with some money in your pocket you feel that you are entitled to toy with them; don't you have any shame?"

Taken aback, Xu Ziling said, "I have never thought about it that way. But if no one visits them, and they don't earn enough money to redeem themselves, won't they continue to live in desolation?"

Kou Zhong stated matter-of-factly, "Isn't that Yihong Courtyard opened by your Wagang Army? Why are you criticizing us?"

And then with a cold humph he added, "Everything is born because there is a demand for it; otherwise, who would want to go to the battlefield to kill or be killed?"

Shen Luoyan knitted her brows. "What are you talking about?" she said, "Yihong Courtyard has always been Du Fuwei's eyes in this area. To us, Wagang Army, it's a god@mn business."

The two boys' countenance changed.

Shen Luoyan smiled and said, "You love to fool around at the

pleasure houses, that's enough. Now that Qin Shubao has surrendered to our army, what do you, two little kids, have in mind?"

Kou Zhong sprang up and went to the open door; craning his neck, he looked outside wondered aloud, "The sound of our fighting shook the house, but how come there is no one come over to check it out?"

Shen Luoyan said indifferently, "Are you forgetting that we want to capture you alive? There is an inescapable net outside, even if you, two little demons, grew wings, it would still be difficult for you to fly away."

With a wry smile Xu Ziling said, "Do you not know that this is called 'biting the hand that feeds you'?"

Shen Luoyan slyly replied, "I only have your well-being in mind. Right now the whole country is in rebellion. To bring order out of chaos, only Duke Mi one person is able to do it. If not for the fact that you have given me a big favor, I would not have time to invite you to join our army."

And then, a bit impatiently she added, "Quickly make your decision! I don't have time to waste on you."

Listening to her tone, the two boys' pride was hurt. With a cold

snort Xu Ziling said, “If you don’t have time then excuse yourself! We, two brothers, love to roam the wide sea and sky, to live free and easy life.”

A thick, cold murderous aura flashed through Shen Luoyan’s eyes; she suddenly rose up and in a flash was already by the door. With her back toward the two boys, she coldly said, “Since I cannot use you, I must kill you. Don’t even think of leaving this place alive today.” In another flash she vanished outside the door.

The two boys looked at each other in dismay. It only then did they understand why this ‘Pretty Junshi’, whose beauty matched the immortals, was also known as ‘Serpent and Scorpion Beauty’ [see Book 3 Chapter 4].

The two boys stared blankly for half a day. Even then, there was still no movement outside. Kou Zhong took a very deep breath and said, “What do you think? Shall we kill our way out?”

Xu Ziling maintained his composure. He shook his head and said, “Rushing out just like that is tantamount to deliver our lives in vain. Perhaps as soon as we step out the door, there would be a big net coming down to catch us, two fools. I say she still wants to capture us alive.”

And then he added in low voice, “Just now when we heard Ol’

Die's name our countenance changed. With her keen eyesight plus her skill and knowledge, how could she not hear even half a word about us? Obviously she already knew our background; therefore, she spent so much effort, mentally and physically, to win us over, so that we will willingly offer 'Duke Yang treasure trove' to her."

Kou Zhong was astonished, "Xiao Ling, you are really something. Unexpectedly you are able to infer so many things just from her reaction. Ha! I have an idea. Remember what Ol' Chen of Jukun Bang taught us about architecture? This hotel is made up of eight courtyard houses. We are located at the west wing of the east courtyard, the door is facing the flower garden in the center of the courtyard, outside the wall opposite the door is the main garden surrounding the eight courtyards, with towering trees all around. Therefore, if we can get there, our chance of escaping will be a lot higher."

Xu Ziling looked at the wall opposite the door, where the bed was located; he smiled wryly and said, "We are not Zhai Rang, how could we break through the wall and flee?"

And then he looked up to the ceiling and said with a sigh, "If my guess is correct, there are definitely enemies up there."

As usual, Kou Zhong always had a plan. First, he closed the door, and then he told Xu Ziling, "Keep watch for me, I am going

to loosen a few bricks.” Finished speaking, he pulled his long saber and jumped onto the bed.

Xu Ziling moved to the window by the door. When he looked outside, he saw more than a dozen big men jump down from the roof of the building across the courtyard, and immediately fanned out along the corridor, heading toward their direction.

He was just about to warn Kou Zhong when there was a loud ‘boom!’ from above, the roof tiles rained down, followed by an iron-tower like man with a pair of hammers in his hands, falling down.

In that instant Xu Ziling threw away his conjecture that Shen Luoyan wanted to capture them alive; he was well aware that this ‘Serpent and Scorpion Beauty’ has indeed chosen the evil scheme to kill them.

At this moment, he was reliving the situation where a mob of gangsters was about to kill him.

Everything became incomparably clear.

He knew clearly when this big man was going to land, as well as his falling speed; so much so that he also knew what the man was about to do next.

The difference was that now he knew how to deal with this situation.

He clearly knew that if he let the opponent unleash the power of his pair of huge hammers, which weighed over a hundred catties each, not only he could easily force Xu Ziling put the door, it would also be extremely difficult for Kou Zhong, who was standing by the wall, to escape with his life.

In this moment where life and death was hanging by a thread, his mind and spirit became crystal clear; he completely forgot about life and death. Focusing his willpower and all the strength he could muster, he readied himself for the exact moment when the opponent would touch the ground. Stepping forward in large strides, his entire being moved as fast as lightning, even his saber chopped down swiftly.

Indeed as Xu Ziling expected, the big man had already made up his mind that as soon as his feet touched the ground, he would borrow the momentum to shoot forward to increase the power of his hammers to thundering tens of thousand catties. Once he sent Xu Ziling out the door, his companions would chop him into thousand pieces, and then he could focus his entire attention to deal with Kou Zhong.

To his surprise, however, as he was exerting his strength, the saber aura already enveloped his body. He felt that no matter

where he wanted move to evade, or perhaps to block the attack and launch a counterstrike, he simply was not able to.

When he broke the roof tile, he was really underestimating the enemy; he thought that they were just two kids, it would not be hard to catch them. How could he know that in terms of timing and the angle of attack, Xu Ziling's chop has reached a top quality martial art expert level?

This moment he already had no time to think whether the opponent was indeed very formidable, or he just happened to use a move sent by the gods in heaven. In his extreme panic, he threw his pair of hammers, one to Kou Zhong, the other to Xu Ziling; while at the same time he pushed his palms forward to generate reaction force with strong gust of wind. With no other choice, he clumsily had to jump out from the place where he came in.

In the meantime, Kou Zhong, who was standing on the bed, was about to turn around to help. Suddenly he saw a big iron hammer was flying toward him. "Good throw!" he shouted.

In a flash there was a loud 'Boom!', followed by bricks and mortar flew everywhere as the iron hammer broke through the wall.

Xu Ziling also easily evaded the other flying hammer. He let the

hammer hit the wooden door, sending splinters of wood everywhere. Finally the hammer itself landed on the courtyard outside. Meanwhile Xu Ziling let out a wild cry, concentrated his power on his brows, and charged toward the broken wall.

How could Kou Zhong not understand Xu Ziling's intention? He also exerted his strength and charged toward the broken wall.

'Boom!' The two boys, along with fragments of brick and stone, leaped into the neighboring room. Outside the door was precisely the big garden surrounding the eight courtyard houses.

They shot forward, burst open the door, and ran outside.

This move was obviously outside the enemy's anticipation, unexpectedly they did not see anybody blocking their way; however, they heard the rustling of the wind from the tiled roof behind them.

The two boys did not dare to tarry, they immediately unleashed the full potential of the 'Bird Crossing Technique taught by Yun Yuzhen; like an arrow they shot into the park. With several twists and turns, they went deep into the forest.

Book 3 Chapter 7 – Brothel And Casino In One

The two boys ran to a side alley. From here looking out, they happened to see the wall and the main gate of Cuibi Lou that was owned by Xiang Yushan's old dad. There were layers of courtyard on the inside, in term of scale, it was definitely above Yihong Courtyard.

Following the setting sun in the west, the sky was gradually turning dark. The lanterns of Cuibi Lou were lighted, giving the two boys some kind of romantic, yet mournful feeling, reflecting the two boys' uneasy mood.

Out of habit, the two of them sat on the ground with their backs against the wall. After staring blankly for a long time, Kou Zhong gnashed his teeth and said, "That woman [again, used derogatorily; also in subsequent references to 'woman' below] is very ruthless, unexpectedly she really wanted to take our lives, completely ignoring the fact that we are her benefactor."

"She did not want us to fall into Ol' Die's hand," Xu Ziling said, "So what do we do now? We promised that kid Li Shimin that we

are going to wait for Madame Dong Ming's arrival. But now Ol' Die's people already knew where we are. If we don't leave now, what are we waiting for?"

"Our little life is important," Kou Zhong said, "Let that Li kid blame us, but we must immediately leave town, and go the farther the better. And then we'll look for Susu Jie at Xingyang. Her Miss has already been captured anyway, so we can take her back to the south, where she can join our Shuanglong Bang [two-dragon clan] in trading salt in peace and quiet."

Xu Ziling forced a smile and said, "If we just leave the town in big style like this, if that stinky woman did not catch us, we would be just like a sheep offering itself into Ol' Die's tiger mouth. The best course of action right now is to find a place to hide, and then at midnight we will try to climb the city wall to escape. Relying on our current skill, if we have things like rope and hook, we should be able to make it."

"More and more I found out that you, this kid, have a brain like mine," Kou Zhong praised, "Come! There is plenty of money in our purse, while the sky is not completely dark yet, we quickly find a hardware store to buy hooks. As for rope, to steal some is not a difficult matter."

After making up their mind, their spirit was aroused; they came out to the street at the other end of the alley and stealthily

walked along the main street, but soon discovered that other than wine shop and pleasure houses, other stores had already closed.

Kou Zhong suddenly had a bright idea, “We’d better look for that Xiang Yushan for help, that kid seems to have a little yiqi [spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice, code of brotherhood]. Right now there are friends meeting with misfortune, he should not be shirked without dishonor.”

Xu Ziling was doubtful, “Is he that kind of person?” he asked.

Kou Zhong wrapped his arm around his shoulder as they turned into another side street and walked toward the direction of Cuibi Lou. He said bitterly, “This is called we are at the end of our rope, without any choice we have to ignore what kind of saint he is, and simply consider him as a good saint. Worst yet, we are also wanted criminals; reporting to the authority is tantamount to committing suicide. Besides, who knows if those government officials are not in cahoots with the stinky woman or Ol’ Die? Right now I don’t dare to trust anybody.”

Xu Ziling spoke in distress, “After hearing that stinky woman speaking about the girls in pleasure houses, I really do not wish to go to brothel anymore. Is there any other way?”

“The other way is digging a tunnel,” Kou Zhong replied, “But

please forgive laozi for not accompanying you. Don't be so easy to be influenced by other people, will you? Don't forget that at Yangzhou, all those ladies that we know voluntarily sell their bodies to earn money. Don't those so-called government officers also prostitute themselves to be the Emperor's lackeys? At least being a lady you won't easily have your head chopped. Ha! We are here!"

The two boys crossed the busy street clamoring with horses and carriages racing against each other. The decorative lanterns were hung high, shining their light on the people coming and going on the street; it was indeed very lively. However, because the two boys have witnessed the brutal scene of war, they had a feeling that all these liveliness was but a fleeting moment.

Upon reaching the main gate, they waited for a gorgeous looking carriage galloping inside, and then trailed behind it. Six, seven doorkeepers stepped forward to meet them. Seeing the two boys' bright and neat clothing, and spirited expression, they did not dare to be negligence. One of them spoke respectfully, "Welcome Gongzi, your presence honors us; I wonder ..."

Kou Zhong knew what to expect; he casually stuffed a string of coins into his hand. Assuming a young tycoon air he spoke arrogantly, "We are your honorable Xiang Yushan Gongzi's old friends. Have Yushan arrived?"

The men felt even deeper veneration for them; the man who spoke earlier hastily said, “Xiaoren [little/lowly one] He Biao, two Gongzi, please follow Xiaoren.”

Kou Zhong puffed up his chest and said, “Lead the way!”

He Biao bowed respectfully with cupped fist and turned around to lead the way.

The two boys followed him passing through a spacious square where at least a row of ten carriages could park, toward the main building. As they reached the bottom of the steps leading to the door, a rather good-looking middle-aged woman with gorgeous dress [orig. lovely scene of blossoming plants swaying in the breeze] met them. He Biao hurriedly stepped forward and whispered a few words in her ear. And then after saluting them, he walked away.

All smiles [orig. brows raised in delight, eyes laughing], the beautiful lady stepped between the two boys, and then with each hand grabbing the boys’ elbows, she coyly said, “Turns out Xiang Shaoye’s good friends. I wonder what are two Gongzi’s honorable surnames and great given names? Ay! Almost forgot, you can just call me Feng Niang [lit. phoenix lady].”

Kou Zhong enjoyed her generous ‘gift of luck with women’ very much; while following her inside, he said, “My name is Zhang Shi,

and he is Li Min. Ha! Feng Niang, you are so pretty, you attract us to our death.”

Feng Niang laughed so hard that she was shaking, “Although Zhang Gongzi is young, you are an old hand in the midst of flowers. Don’t flatter people casually! Otherwise if Nujia [lit. slave] wants to entangle you the whole night, you will regret it.”

Casting a coquettish glance toward Xu Ziling, he said, “Li Gongzi is more honest than you are.”

By this time Kou Zhong had completely forgotten about the stinky woman and the old dad; bursting with joy he said, “This kid is only pretending to be an old hand; if Feng Niang don’t believe me, you can give him a try.”

Greatly embarrassed, Xu Ziling said, “Don’t listen to him, I ... hey! I ...”

In the meantime Feng Niang already pulled them into the main hall, where more than ten clusters of chair were arranged, and she had them sit down in a cluster of chair leaning against the corner. She laughed and said, “No need to say anything, how can I, Feng Niang, make an error of judgment?”

Two young maids, about sixteen, seventeen years old, came out to greet them, to pour tea and offer towel; their service was very

attentive.

The two boys swept the room with their gaze, and noticed that there were already more than ten groups of guests in the hall; the atmosphere was very lively.

After instructing the maid to notify Xiang Yushan, Feng Niang's fawning manner grew without restraint, "Based on two Gongzi's personality, which girl would not fight over the right to accompany you?"

Xu Ziling also relaxed. He was about to speak when Feng Niang asked to be excused; she stood up and rushed to meet another group of visitors that look like rich merchants.

Kou Zhong told the two maids, "Jiejie, no need to wait on us, we, brothers have a private matters we'd like to discuss." The two young maids took their leave.

Kou Zhong excitedly said, "Have you ever be well-regarded like this? We'd better stay here tonight to celebrate a wonderful evening; who'd think that we would hide in here? Besides, this grand occasion is bestowed by that Li guy, we might as well wait until tomorrow night to sneak into Dong Ming flagship and do the best for him."

"Hey!" Xu Ziling stammered, "I don't know why, but my heart is

flustered and panic; I don't know what to do."

Kou Zhong sighed. "To be honest," he said, "I am a bit nervous as well. But there is always first time for everything. Otherwise, how can we be considered real men? Later, we will ask 'yiqi Shan' to pick two most beautiful girls and make it clear that they must take up the responsibility to give us 'guidance'. Hey! But if we just say it like that, won't we have no face left?"

While the two boys were having tumultuous thought, Xiang Yushan arrived. For some reason, in his 'habitat', this fellow was exceptionally confident, not at all like the good-for-nothing appearance he displayed when they met in the street earlier that day. Especially since there were four big men escorting him, he looked completely imposing.

From a zhang away Xiang Yushan had already laughed aloud and said, "What Zhang Gongzi, Li Gongzi, turns out its two renxiong. Forgive me for failing to salute you!"

The two boys noticed his attitude was still sincere, he really lived up to the nickname they have given him, the 'yiqi Shan'; hence they were relieved and immediately stood up to pay their respect.

After the three of them were seated, Xiang Yushan inquired, "This time two renxiong came to Pengcheng, is there any business

you need to attend, or are you just sightseeing, enjoying some scenic spots around here?”

Knowing that he was trying to get a feel of who these two boys were, Kou Zhong laughed and said, “There’s a saying that traveling for ten thousand li is better than patronize ten thousand scrolls of book. We, two brothers, roam to the other end of the world, is precisely to widen our horizon.”

Leaning forward, he continued in low voice, “Frankly speaking, our visit to the pleasure house is also part of our effort to enrich our knowledge. Because this is the first time we visit the pleasure house, our hope is that Xiang Xiong would give direction and take care of us. Hee, hee ... ! Xiang Xiong is sensible, most probably I won’t have to explain more?”

In his heart Xu Ziling was full of praise; Kou Zhong indeed have a knack of turning such an embarrassing and reputation-losing matter into something that sounded so natural.

Xiang Yushan suddenly understood; he laughed and nodded his head, “That should be no problem,” he said, “Just leave it to me.”

After pondering for half a day, he said seriously, “Zhang Xiong and Li Xiong please forgive Xiaodi [little brother, referring to self] for bringing up deep subject to a comparative stranger, after all, what we, men, seek after in the world is nothing more than

wealth and women. I see that two renxiong [dear friends] are men of character, and what you carry is top-quality blade; you are definitely not a nobody. I wonder if two renxiong have any plan for the future?”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “We are living in the moment [as before, the original was ‘have wine now, get drunk now’]. Right now we only have plan for tonight. As for what will happen tomorrow, we will think about it when we get out of bed. Ha ...”

Xiang Yushan laughed a perfunctory laughter and then said, “Turns out you have bottomless money purse, hence you have no worry about tomorrow. Xiaodi is really envious.”

Xu Ziling matter-of-factly replied, “Xiang Xiong is definitely much richer than we are; we just recently made a business deal, so the cash in hand is rather abundant. After the money is gone, we must start earning money again!”

Xiang Yushan revealed a mysterious smile. “I wonder which line of business the two gentleman do?” he asked.

The two boys were dumbstruck. And then Kou Zhong lowered his voice as he said proudly, “I really don’t want to conceal anything from you, our business is salt. Hey! The kind that does not need to pay taxes.”

“I see,” Xiang Yushan happily said, “No wonder as soon as we met I got a feeling that we are kindred spirits. Perhaps there are more possibilities of cooperation between us later on?”

“Is Xiang Xiong also in transporting salt business?” Xu Ziling asked in astonishment.

“Compared to salt business, it is more ‘small capital, huge profit’, easy-to-get-rich kind of business,” Xiang Yushan calmly said, “But please forgive Xiaodi for temporarily keeping the climax of the story to myself. I’ll wait until two gentlemen enjoy all kinds of pleasure my Cuibi Lou has to offer, I will examine the grand plan to get rich with Zhang Xiong and Li Xiong.”

“So there is a business that is more lucrative than sea sand?” Kou Zhong happily asked, “We will definitely listen with respectful attention.”

Xiang Yushan nonchalantly replied, “Xiaodi still has something I’d like to inquire, and then Xiaodi will take gentlemen to broaden your horizon.”

The two boys were greatly delighted; they nodded their heads ready to answer his question.

This Xiang Yushan was at most only two, three years older than the two boys, but his demeanor was just like a lot older man who

had deep experience of the ways of the world, in just a few words he had played down the information the two boys wanted to know more.

Xiang Yushan said with a smile, “Right now the world is in chaos, heroes and warriors arose, and gentlemen are definitely Wulin characters who understands the compass and set square of Wulin world. Right now Xiaodi is dying to make friends with gentlemen, I do wish you would inform Xiaodi about your martial school or sect origin, so that we can deal with each other candidly.”

Kou Zhong exchanged an eye signal with Xu Ziling first before answering, “Our martial art skill is actually handed down in a family. Xiao Min’s [little Min] and my dad were escort masters with an office in Yangzhou, but they served far away places, and they were also sworn brothers. Hey! But in one expedition they encountered thieves and thus lost their lives. Hence we went out to roam the world.”

How could Xiang Yushan know that Kou Zhong was simply spouting nonsense? He laughed aloud and stood up, “Gentlemen, please follow Xiaodi!” he said.

Recalling that they were about to receive the most important lesson in their lives, the two boys followed him delightedly.

Both nervous and happy, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling followed

Xiang Yushan stepping out of the main building, and only then did they know that the beyond the rear courtyard there were other buildings that look like residence buildings. A gravel path, lined with well-maintained flower gardens on both sides, led them from the main building's rear door to another big door. This moment there were a lot of people walking back and forth on the path connecting the two doors; it was a very busy path indeed.

Kou Zhong could hear noises coming from the inside, it sounded that there were hundreds of people inside the building. "What kind of place is that?" he wondered aloud.

Immensely proud, Xiang Yushan replied, "This is the biggest casino in Pengcheng."

Xu Ziling jumped in fright, "But we don't want to gamble!" he said.

Xiang Yushan laughed and said, "Naturally Xiaodi understood, but throughout the ages brothel and casino are always inseparable. Any place without brothel and casino will not thrive. The reason our Cuibi Lou can dominate Pengcheng is precisely because of the combination of these two businesses, and thus the whole Pengcheng is flourishing. Don't you want to broaden your horizon? Just relax and follow Xiaodi to increase your knowledge."

The two boys looked at each other. They began to feel that this ‘yiqi Shan’ was not as simple as he was on the surface. Just like in Yangzhou, the biggest casino was owned by Zhuhua Bang [bamboo flower clan/gang]. Without a strong background, who would dare to touch this kind of big, lucrative business?

As soon as the three of them entered the casino’s main gate, Xiang Yushan loudly said, “These two gentlemen are my friends, you must take care of them well.”

The several big men guarding the door immediately voiced their compliance respectfully.

As they stepped into the casino, a fat man, whose entire body was covered in copper stench, and looked unbearably vulgar, came out to meet them. “Would you like Xiaoren to prepare guest rooms for three Shaoye?”

Xiang Yushan waved his hand and said, “We are just looking around, you go take care of other guests.”

The fat man complied and withdrew.

But Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were just staring agape. It was the first time that they were inside a casino. They saw the gambling tables, the gambling equipment, down to the furniture and furnishing, none was not gorgeous or exquisite. Moreover, the

place was very large. Not only it was divided into three sections, front, middle and rear, each section had halls on the left and right, joined together. Therefore, although there were about four, five hundred people there, these gambling halls did not feel crowded at all.

Most striking was that all dealers, down to the women pouring tea and offering tobacco in each hall were all young, alluring girls with jade countenance. And their clothes were sexy; they wore only moxiong [old feminine garment, covering chest and abdomen, similar to modern day tube top] and dudou [lit. belly cover; apron-like undergarment, also only covering chest and abdomen] like red upper garment, and skin-tight green short skirt, so that their jade, lotus root like upper arms and their fair, slender jade legs were completely exposed. When they walked back and forth among the gambling tables, their breasts and buttocks swayed like rippling water, graceful and beautiful, so that the two boys who watched them had their soul shaken and their mind swept away, they were completely stunned.

Funny thing was that Xiang Yushan and the other gamblers seemed to turn a blind eye to these women.

Right this moment two waitresses, whose smile was as beautiful as a flower, came over, offering fragrant tea and some pastries, while also helping Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling to remove their outer clothing.

Not only they were very attentive, their alluring flesh constantly touching and bumping onto the two boys' body.

Seeing the two boys' powerfully built body, their fitting leather vest, their broad shoulders and narrow waist, their out of the ordinary might, Xiang Yushan's eyes lit up. He sighed and said, "Gentlemen's figure is indeed shapely, certainly it is rarely seen."

The two waitresses were also staring blankly at the two boys; they looked even more fiery with passion. One of them even embraced Xu Ziling from behind before laughing tenderly and then picked their outer garments and left with the other waitress.

It was the first time that the two boys received such a generous treatment; momentarily their soul melted and their mind turned soft; as for their body, who knows where they went?

Xiang Yushan reached out to stroke Kou Zhong's leather vest; he said in astonishment, "This is the finest quality bear hide, is only produced in the land of the north, and is pricier than gold. Xiaodi had to suffer untold hardships before obtaining one; I wonder where did Zhang Xiong buy it?"

How could Kou Zhong tell him that it was a gift from Li Shimin? Cooking up some nonsense he said, "Xiang Xiong certainly knows good product. We exchanged salt for these two leather vests with a traveling merchant; indeed they cost more than gold."

By this time the two waitresses returned, each one pulled the boys' arms to press them bodies against their prominent and silky breasts with a very enthusiastic attitude.

Xiang Yushan introduced these two women to them, one was called Cui Xiang, the other Cui Yu; and then he said, "Zhang Gongzi and Li Gongzi do not need your service for the time being, they will call you when they need anything!"

Clearly disappointed, the two women went back to work.

Kou Zhong delightedly said, "Now I understand why brothel and casino are inseparable, Xiang Xiong's Ol' Die is really business-savvy."

Xiang Yushan laughed proudly.

Xu Ziling asked, "Do these beauties have Cui as their surname? I wonder what is the history of the Cuibi, two characters, in the name Cuibi Lou?"

Xiang Yushan's eyes revealed an adoring look as he spoke tenderly, "That was the fragrant name of a 'thousand-tender, hundred-charm' beauty; but she is already taken [orig. famous flower has its master/owner], she is our Clan's dragon head [i.e. boss] Laoda's most favored concubine."

Kou Zhong asked in surprise, “Turns out Xiang Xiong is a member of a Clan; I wonder what’s your precious Clan’s great name ...”

Xiang Yushan cut him off, “We’ll talk about it later. Come! Why don’t you play a game or two? If you win you can keep it, if you lose I’ll settle the account. Gentlemen, this way please.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly dismayed by Xiang Yushan’s ‘yiqi’; for the first time they started to get suspicious.

Although the two boys dreamed about making a fortune all day long, it was due to the necessities of life, not because they were greedy for money or addicted to stuffs. They had been drifting along in the marketplace since childhood; they had deep understanding of the principle ‘no one has voracious desire of inexpensive thing’. Not to mention that they recently learned a valuable lesson from their mistake in dealing with their Beautiful Shifu. How could they easily trust this new acquaintance with evasive speech?

Xu Ziling cleared his throat and said, “We are not too interested in gambling; how about calling those two beauties just now to ... hey! To ... whatever! Is it alright?”

Not showing any concern, Xiang Yushan said, “Speaking about

beauty, those two servant girls[1] have not made the cut yet; the most popular in our place are Cui Ning and Cui Zhi, two girls. But you can only see them in the noble guest room [i.e. VIP lounge]. Let us stroll around in here first, later I'll take you to have a drink and be merry with them! I guarantee gentlemen's trip would not be made in vain."

Seeing that he did not pressure them to gamble, the two boys were somewhat relieved. Gladly they followed him passing through the left and squeezing through the right among the jam-packed gambling tables, toward the largest hall in the middle.

By way of introduction Xiang Yushan said, "Our gambling hall was meticulously designed by an expert in five-element principle. One big and eight small, nine gambling halls are positioned based on Nine-Palace formation. The biggest gambling hall in the middle joined together suppressing the eight points of the compass, as a result the color scheme rely mainly on bright yellow, because dark yellow is too heavy and sluggish. There are twenty-five tables, because five is the earth element, and twenty-five is the square of five, the meaning is that the profit will be doubled."

It was only then did the two boys find out that opening a casino also involved certain knowledge; it was an eye-opener.

By nature the boys were inquisitive. Listening to this interesting topic, inevitably they asked left and right, and completely forgot

about those beautiful waitresses who look at them with raised eyebrows and amused eyes.

Xiang Yushan led them toward a table where twenty, thirty people were crowding around it. They watched as the beautiful and alluring female dealer threw the giant dice made of bone into a square bowl, and after covering the bowl she raised it above her head and shook it vigorously. And then she put it down on the table and shouted tenderly, “Honorable guests, please place your bet!”

One after another the gamblers put their bets on the betting board.

Xiang Yushan said, “This is called ‘betting treasure’; if the bet matches the number of dots on the dice, the payment is three times the stake.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “The odd in winning is one in six, but to you, the casino, it is five of six. No wonder opening a casino can make a fortune.”

Xiang Yushan laughed and said, “You can also bet on the dice color; the odd is one to one, very even.”

Xu Ziling focused his attention to watch, most people bet on the number of dots, obviously they were all hoping to win triple their

wager. That's why betting on the color of the dice was provided no more as lip service!

"Don't you want to play a hand or two?" Xiang Yushan prompted.

The two boys just shook their head.

Xiang Yushan simply brushed it aside and led them into the middle hall. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's eyes immediately brightened. They saw leaning against a gambling table to the left, a beautiful woman, like a red dot in the sea of obscurity, was gambling enthusiastically.

Not only she had picturesque facial feature, the most noticeable thing about her was that the opening of the flap of her gown was extremely low, exposing almost half of her jade breasts and her deep cleavage, so that she looked exceptionally tarty.

The two boys often heard that a lot of people from the northern part of the country have blood relationship with non-Han people, so that in general they were unrestrained by convention. Still it was the first time that they saw a woman openly dressed in such a low-cut dress in public place with numerous people; they could not help staring with mouth agape.

Xiang Yushan smiled wryly and said, "That woman must never

be touched. Despite her coquettish charm, she is actually one of the Peng Liang Hui's [society] three masters, known as Sao Niang [coquettish lady], Ren Meimei. Her martial skill outstanding, she is adept at toying with men, from head to toe she is covered in thorns, and woe is men who run into her. Even I do not dare to mess with her."

Kou Zhong swallowed a mouthful of saliva; he said in low voice, "What is Peng Liang Society?"

Xiang Yushan was surprised, "You have not even heard of Peng Liang Society?" he asked, "Peng is Pengcheng, Liang refers to Liang Jun [Liang county], sixty li northwest of Pengcheng. Peng Liang Society is one of 'Eight Clans [bang] Ten Societies [hui]'. Wherever they go, Jianghu people will have to give them some face."

Finished speaking, he was just about to pull the two boys away, who would have thought that Ren Meimei's eyes happened to leave the gambling table and look at their direction? Seeing Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, two people, her beautiful eyes lit up, with coquettish laugh she called, "Yushan, what are you doing staring blankly like a fool over there? Why haven't you come over and hang out with nujia [again, 'slave', a polite way a woman refers to herself]?"

While waving his hand in response, Xiang Yushan whispered,

“No matter what she wants you to do, remember to push all the blame to me.” Finished speaking he promptly walked over to her.

As the two boys heard that she was another Bang Hui [clan and society] people, immediately they felt headache. Without any choice they braced themselves and followed Xiang Yushan toward Ren Meimei.

[1] Servant girl, orig. yatou - girl, can be used both deprecatingly and as a term of endearment.

Book 3 Chapter 8 – Trouble In The Casino

Ren Meimei left the gambling table to meet them. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling found out that her clothes was tightly wrapped around her body, emphasizing her full body and exquisite curves; immediately their hearts were beating faster.

This charming beauty moved her full-of-youthfulness-and-vitality body to three people's presence. After sizing up Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling again, she turned to Xiang Yushan and said with a laugh, "These two Gongzi seem to be strangers; are they your friends?"

With a bitter laugh Xiang Yushan replied, "Mei Gu [charming aunt], you'd better not provoke them."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling did not expect Xiang Yushan to be that forthcoming toward her; they got a shock.

Ren Meimei did not take offense at all; she walked around to the two boys' back and laughed coquettishly, "Xiang San Shao [third young master] must have spoken a lot of malicious words

behind my, Ren Meimei's back, but two gentlemen must by all means not believe him. If he is a good man, then I am the Guanyin Dashi [Goddess of Mercy] who saves common people."

Xiang Yushan cleared his throat and said, "Mei Gu, you must not damage our friendship. Don't forget that Peng Liang Hui and our Baling Bang have always been living together in harmony ..."

Ren Meimei circled around to face the two boys again; covering her mouth, she laughed tenderly, "Did you see that? Xiang San Shaoye frequently uses Baling Bang to bully me, a weak woman; what kind of hero is that? Wow! Two little brothers[1] are really handsome, no wonder San Shaoye took a fancy to you. What are your names?"

The two boys had a feeling that Baling Bang sounded familiar, but momentarily they did not remember who mentioned this name to them.

Xiang Yushan was showing his displeasure openly, "Mei Gu, did you lose some money? Let me compensate you then, but don't babble nonsense in here."

Evidently Ren Meimei was not afraid of him, she cast Xiang Yushan a flirtatious glance and said, "Am I, Ren Meimei, someone who doesn't have any gambling nature? You are the one who babbled nonsense."

Suddenly her hand shot forward to grab Xiang Yushan.

Xiang Yushan let out a cold snort and raised his right hand to brush away her artery.

Ren Meimei laughed and said, “I don’t want to fight!” Yet although her mouth said so, her jade palm flipped over and swept down to block Xiang Yushan’s attacking right hand, while her crooked finger counterattacked by flicking Xiang Yushan’s artery.

Xiang Yushan pulled his hand back and turned it into a chop, with his curved palm swatted her flicking finger.

These several moves happened within an area about one chi wide; it was both swift and displaying deep offensive and defensive techniques. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling watched the exchange wide-eyed; they were very interested in this kind of intricate fighting technique.

Ren Meimei laughed tenderly, “I haven’t seen you for several months, turns out you were hiding to train your martial art skill; no wonder your arrogance soaring to the sky.” While she was speaking, her jade hand made subtle swinging a few times, as if she was going to attack, but not exactly attacking, as if she was blocking, but not exactly blocking.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling intuitively understood what she was doing, they were able to fully grasp her move and strategy. While obviously Xiang Yushan failed to understand Ren Meimei's bizarre technique; unexpectedly he took a step backward. The two boys knew the worst was yet to come, Ren Meimei already laughed tenderly, while fast as lightning she thrust her finger onto the back of Xiang Yushan's palm.

While Xiang Yushan was jolted by this attack, Ren Meimei already grabbed his sleeve and pulled it hard, so that he was carried away and stumbled to the side. All the while she did not forget to flash her enchanting smile toward the two boys and unhurriedly said, "I'll have a few words with Yushan, and then I'll come back to accompany you."

They saw the two people went toward the corner of the hall and mumbled several secret whispers with each other. Xu Ziling's countenance suddenly changed. "I remember now," he said in hoarse voice, "Didn't Beautiful Shifu mention that Baling Bang is the Emperor's young son's running dog? They are specializing in trafficking human beings!"

Kou Zhong sucked in a mouthful of cold air, "So what good can we say that he took a fancy on us? Quick! We must slip away immediately."

"Hold on!" Xu Ziling pulled him back, "They are back. We are

going to change according to the situation. Ay! I really did not see this ‘mountain trader’ [play on words on Yushan, ‘jade mountain’] is also a martial art expert. On that street we randomly picked someone to ask, why did we pick a martial art expert and a bad egg [i.e. b@stard] in one?”

Meanwhile Ren Meimei and Xiang Yushan walked back hand-in-hand toward them. Looking at their friendly spirit, the two boys knew that the two people had reached a private agreement.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt their scalp turned numb, knowing that once again the two of them had become a commodity.

From a distance Ren Meimei already let out her unrestraint laughter, “Turns out the two little brothers [see footnote 1] came here this time is to have a taste of women’s gentle and soft feeling. Let me, Jiejie [older sister] take care of this matter.”

This time Xiang Yushan’s tone of speech was greatly changed, “It’s rare that Mei Gu shows such respect for you. I will have a VIP suite opened up for you, everybody can drink, have a chat and laugh, and enjoy the romance together.”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “Why worry about it? I suddenly have an urge to play a hand or two, I am good at Paijiu [paigow, dominoes] the most.”

Xiang Yushan laughed, "So be it," he said, "You ought to go to the VIP suite right away. Mei Gu also loves Paijiu the most. You guys want to accompany her playing, nothing could be better than that."

This time Kou Zhong was at a loss for words.

Still maintaining his elegant and unconventional demeanor, Xu Ziling shrugged his shoulders and said to Kou Zhong, "If you want to gamble, you should seek my approval first. I don't know anything about Paijiu, but I do want to stroll around the casino to broaden my horizon."

Ren Meimei moved her tender body to the front. Pulling the crook of two boys' arms she gave Xiang Yushan a meaningful glance and said with a smile, "Let me take care of them."

Xiang Yushan laughed to give his approval and immediately turned around and left.

Ren Meimei intimately pulled the two boys along toward the inner lobby. She said with enchanting smile, "You must not listen to that fellow Xiang Yushan talking any idle gossip about other people."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were about to speak, but when they looked at her, they saw that when she was walking, the twin

peaks on her chest were continuously bobbing up and down following her gait; it was extremely captivating, so that they could not restrain their hearts from thumping wildly and jumping madly, and they forgot what they were about to say.

All of a sudden they did not think that she was so scary anymore; especially her figure and her expression, none did not carry a special charm that was capable of moving other people's heart, that unconsciously gave birth to a feeling that even if they had to die for her, they would gladly do it.

The fact was that Ren Meimei was extremely proud in her heart.

She had 'read' countless men, and in just one glance she could tell that these two boys were still virgin. To a person who was adept at 'collect and mend' technique like her, the two boys were no more than exquisite serum or sweet nectar that would bring great benefits to her vitality; hence the reason she wanted to wrestle them, by hook or by crook, from Xiang Yushan's hands.

This moment she was exploiting her body, unleashing her superior charm, to evoke the two boys' primal sensual desire.

Xu Ziling's mental power was slightly better than Kou Zhong's; only after a slight daze, his mind cleared up considerably. Seeing Kou Zhong involuntarily panting and licking his lips, and was

showing a leering look on his face, while intentionally used his shoulder to bump her silky breasts, he knew something was not right; his brains moved fast, and he blurted out, “Ol’ Die is here!”

Kou Zhong was startled and came to his senses. “Where is he?” he asked in panic.

Ren Meimei was puzzled, “Didn’t his old dad pass away already?” she asked.

Inwardly, Xu Ziling breathed a sigh of relief; he cooked up some nonsense, “It’s just a joke we invented; it means a ghost is coming, which means nobody is!”

Kou Zhong summoned all the willpower he could muster, he no longer dared to look at this woman’s chest.

Ren Meimei was angry; she twisted her appealing body, immediately the two boys were aware of her well-developed body, burning desire touched their heart and strayed their mind.

But since they were already wary of her, they firmly suppressed their surging lust, while groaning inwardly, wondering how they could get out of this predicament.

If her ‘flesh-temptation’ continued, and they were unable to resist, who knows what kind of dire consequences would ensue.

Xiang Yushan's earlier warning was still ringing in their ears.

Kou Zhong happened to see the gambling table on their left only had five guests around it, which leave seven or eight seats vacant. A sudden inspiration struck his mind, "Let's play a game or two!" he said. Wriggling himself free from Ren Meimei's clutch, he sat on an empty seat.

Ren Meimei did not seem to mind at all, still smiling coyly, she sat on his left, while Xu Ziling took the empty seat on Kou Zhong's other side.

As soon as this beautiful woman sat down, the eyes of the other five guests were immediately drawn to her chest. When Ren Meimei swept her pretty eyes around, the five men were immediately overcome with lust; so much so that one of them was drooling.

The dealer was a woman around twenty years old, quite pretty; but compared to Ren Meimei, she immediately lost her splendor, and no longer enjoyed the limelight.

This table happened to be a Paijiu table. Although Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had never really gambled before, growing up in the marketplace they had seen enough people gambling, naturally they were also well-versed in the way of doing it.

Ren Meimei's interest suddenly arose; she said to the dealer, "Let me be the banker!"

The dealer naturally knew who she was; after repeatedly agreed, she withdrew to the side.

Ren Meimei took the banker position and laughed coquettishly, "Why haven't you put down your bet?"

Everybody immediately put down their bet; they were all very excited.

But Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were groaning in their heart. To have their hard-earned money put down in gambling was naturally painful and heart-breaking.

Ren Meimei's gaze fell on them. "Don't you want to play a hand or two?" she urged, "Quickly put down your bet!"

Kou Zhong giggled and said, "We need to sit tight first and observe how you, the new dealer, play your trick before we lay our bet; alright?"

Ren Meimei only smiled tenderly without saying anything. With skillful finesse she shuffled the tiles, and only after she piled it up stack by stack did she throw the dice and deal the tiles.

It was not clear whether she employed some kind of trick, but she lost three rounds in a row. The gamblers' cheers and applause immediately attracted the attention of the other gamblers on several tables nearby that they flocked over and took all the seats.

Ren Meimei smiled and said to Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, "Jiejie suffers an adverse wind; if you want to win, quickly lay your bet."

From the back, someone yelled, "If you don't bet, give up your seat!"

Ren Meimei gave the man a hard stare; she shouted, "Who dares to tell them to step aside, I'll wring his hands."

The man obviously knew that she was formidable, immediately he kept his mouth shut out of fear.

Kou Zhong had no choice; he fished a tael of silver and tossed it out as his bet.

Ren Meimei burst into a tender laugh and cast a sidelong glance toward the two boys. She was about to deal the tiles under the burning gaze of more than a dozen pairs of eyes, when suddenly a soft and tender voice came from behind Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's back, "Hold on!" And then an incomparably delicate and beautiful jade hand reached out from between the two boys, and

put a piece of gold ingot, weighed at least ten taels, next to Kou Zhong's pitiful one tael of silver.

This action sent the gamblers into an uproar, because this ingot of gold worth at least several hundred taels of silver, so it was indeed rare that someone would place that much wager in one bet.

Ren Meimei's eyes shot a cold flash as she looked at the beautiful woman that squeezed through several men that they were pushed to the east and opened to the west.

When Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked up in astonishment, a pair of delicate hands already pressed on their shoulders. As they looked closer, they could not help crying out to their Niang, because the woman was none other than the 'Serpent and Scorpion Beauty' Shen Luoyan.

Shen Luoyan was looking down at the two boys, her face showed a sweet smile as she said, "I told you, two little kids, not to play around randomly. Look! People nearly cheated you your wealth and trick you into having sex."

A deep, cold killing aura flitted across Ren Meimei's beautiful eyes. "Who's coming?" she asked coldly.

Shen Luoyan simply met her stare for half a day before smiling

and said, “Who’s the banker? Since Third Master[2] wants to be the banker, you ought to follow bankers’ rule. If you cannot meet the stake, you ought to just admit defeat and leave the field.”

Realizing that the opponent already know who she was, yet still struck a hard stance, Ren Meimei trembled inwardly, yet on her face she still maintained that foxy attitude brimming with the thoughts of romance. “Such a tiny gold ingot, our Peng Liang Hui can still deal with it,” she said with a smile.

Among the guests crowding around them, there were more than a dozen who, when they heard the name Peng Liang Society, were afraid of getting involved. These people immediately slipped out quietly, not even daring to fetch the money they put down as a wager back.

The crowd around the gambling table was thinning out; two seats immediately became vacant.

By this time Kou Zhong already calmed down; he patted Shen Luoyan’s jade hand that was pressed threateningly on his shoulder. “Hi Beautiful!” he said, “There is an empty seat beside me, why do you tire yourself by standing up?”

Shen Luoyan smiled slightly; she stooped down to give each of the two boys a peck on the cheek. Unexpectedly she really sat down on the chair next to Kou Zhong.

Noticing her confidence, as if she was certain she would get them, plus her affectionate kiss with her fragrant, delicate, soft and tender cherry lips, which melted their souls, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling really did not know whether they should be happy or scared.

Ren Meimei still maintained her silence as she dealt the tiles.

[1] Little brothers: here she did not use the term Xiao Xiongdi, which is rather polite, but Xiao Ge'er, basically means 'the boys'.

[2] Third Master - here, the word 'master' is 'dang jia', someone who is in charge/who call the shots. I was tempted to use the word 'skipper' or 'captain', but it sounds so western.

Suddenly several people appeared by the gambling table; they were all casino people, and Xiang Yushan was one of them. Next to him was a fat man wearing embroidered gown; he had broad face but small eyes, yet the pupil of his eyes flickered brightly, so that people know that he was not a character they would want to mess with. Both he and Xiang Yushan were sizing Shen Luoyan up and down with their gleaming eyes.

Shen Luoyan acted as if she did not even notice people were staring at her; she whispered in Kou Zhong's ear, "This time I am saving you once. Whatever big kindness, big enmity between us,

we'll call it quits."

Finished dealing the tiles, Ren Meimei cast a coquettish glance toward the fat man and said, "Xiang Ye [master] has come in person! Do you want to play a round?"

The man she called Master Xiang laughed aloud before plopping himself on an empty seat like a meaty pillar on an upside down golden mountain. He sighed and said, "It's rare that San Dangjia [see footnote] is willing to be the banker, Wagang Fort's Pretty Junshi Miss Shen is willing to play; how could I, Xiang Gui, refuse to play along?"

Ren Meimei's beautiful body trembled; she looked at Shen Luoyan and coldly said, "Turns out it is the Pretty Junshi Shen Luoyan; no wonder you talk big. But winning or losing, I, Ren Meimei, will accompany you play."

Shen Luoyan laughed gracefully, her beautiful eyes darted back and forth between Xiang Gui and Ren Meimei. She said nonchalantly, "The two of you spoke too highly of me. I, Shen Luoyan, only run errands for Duke Mi; how could I talk big or talk small? This time I came here on Duke Mi's behalf only to recover two wandering prodigal children. I am asking a lot of forgiveness from the two of you, so that when Duke Mi attacks Pengcheng in the future and we meet again, nobody will talk a bad talk against each other."

As the remaining dozen or so guests heard the name Wagang Army, they did not dare to tarry; they all left that not even one remained. Even the hundreds of guests in the other halls also left as soon as they heard what was going on.

But there was one person remained. This man wore a tall hat on his head, his countenance stiff like a dead person. He looked straight into Ren Meimei's eyes and spoke in cold manner, "Why haven't you throw the dice?"

The strangest thing was that his man was taller than average person, plus he was standing proudly with his hands behind his back, yet nobody even noticed that he was standing there until all gamblers scattered away and he opened his mouth to talk.

By this time, only three groups of people remained around the gambling table: Ren Meimei who was acting as the banker; Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling and Shen Luoyan; and Xiang Gui plus his son Xiang Yushan and two of their most competent men, who were standing behind him. All three groups immediately turned around with changed countenance.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were the first who were spooked out of their mind; they shouted with cracked voice, "Ol' Die is here!"

The newcomer was indeed Du Fuwei. Besides, only he had the ability to appear out of empty air like shadowless rain.

He showed a surprisingly warm smile as he said tenderly, “These two sons of mine are really capable, even your Ol’ Die was nearly deceived by you. But now that I see you are not inside the hungry wolf’s belly, I am so happy that I am willing to forget your naughtiness.”

Shen Luoyan always did her homework in researching the other militia leaders; she was the first to recognize who he was. “Du Fuwei of River Huai!” she gasped.

Ren Meimei, Xiang Gui and the others were shaken; they were even more confused as to the relation between this old dad Du Fuwei and the two boys.

Du Fuwei still had his eyes fixed on Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling; without even casting any glance toward Shen Luoyan, he asked, “Zhai Rang has not been harmed by Li Mi yet?”

Shen Luoyan’s beautiful body trembled slightly. “Du Zongguan is joking,” she replied in low voice.

Pompously Du Fuwei sat down; his gaze moved to Ren Meimei’s face as he spoke indifferently, “Ol’ Du has not seen ‘Demon Claw’ Nie Jing for several years, is he still not happy if he does not have any woman every night?”

After knowing that the opponent was Du Fuwei, Ren Meimei immediately turned from fierce tiger to tame kitten. She replied awkwardly, “Da Dangjia [first master] is still like that.”

Seeing that as soon as Du Fuwei made his appearance all the men and horses of the opposite party immediately became docile, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were both happy and groaning inwardly, yet they were helpless to do anything. Whether in terms of martial art or battle of wits, they were far inferior to this old fox. Previously, it was only because of various circumstances, coupled with Du Fuwei grossly underestimated them and thus he was careless, that they had their chance. Right now the situation differed greatly; it would not be that easy for Du Fuwei to be fooled again.

Du Fuwei changed direction to Xiang Gui, “I heard you are one of the four martial art masters under the ‘smoking pipe’ Lu Kangshou, with specific responsibility to find handsome men and beautiful women for Lu Kangshou; did you fancy my two inferior sons?”

Xiang Gui jumped in fright; he hastily replied, “Du Zongguan misunderstood; your esteemed sons are merely our casino’s honored guests. We have nothing to do with each other.”

Du Fuwei nodded. “That would be best!” he said.

Everybody knew how vicious and merciless he was, how easy it was to kill; who would dare to speak up?

That day, when Yun Yuzhen, in her capacity as the leader of a Clan, plus she had Dugu Ce's backing behind her, confronted Du Fuwei, in the end she had to submit to him [orig. hang her hands down and called herself 'your servant']. Now, unless Li Mi personally came, nobody even had the qualifications to stand on equal footing with him.

Du Fuwei's eyes returned to Ren Meimei's pretty face. "Why haven't you thrown the dice?" he prompted gently.

How could Ren Meimei dare to refuse? She threw the three dice in her hand onto the table.

At first the three dice were spinning rapidly, but when they were starting to slow down, they stopped abruptly, as if being controlled by some kind of invisible power. All dice had one dot facing up.

Everybody noted that Du Fuwei had his left hand pressed against the table. Needless to say, it was he who sent his internal strength via the table to control the number of dots on the dice. Merely this feat, everybody present asked themselves if they had the ability to imitate. Even Shen Luoyan who was hesitating whether she should make her move also immediately dispelled

that thought.

She came this time, not only she brought about a dozen martial art expert under her command to come along, she also included Zu Junyan, who was of the same position as herself, so it was not because she did not have the strength to do an all-out battle.

Du Fuwei laughed and said, “So Ol’ Du ought to pick the first tile.” He had just finished speaking, a stack of tiles slid across the table as if pulled by invisible hand and stopped in front of him, while at the same time flipped open. To everybody’s surprise, one pair was ‘Heaven’ [all sixes], the other was ‘Supreme’ [one and two, and two and four], a winning combination.

Everybody watching felt their scalp turned numb, not only because of his internal energy that has reached perfection, but even more shocking was because he was able to see through the trick that Ren Meimei did.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Too bad Ol’ Die did not place a bet. If you had put down a dozen his mother’s ingots of gold, and share your winning with child, we would have struck it rich.”

Du Fuwei laughed and said, “I have already put down my bet. My wager is the two of you, unworthy sons. Come! We’ll talk when we get home.”

Xu Ziling laughed aloud and said, “Please forgive your children for being unfilial. Since we have stepped out of the house, we will never come back. At most we will use the ‘snapping heart and artery’ that Niang taught us. Once we are dead, then we will go home to have you, Ol’ Die beat and scold us.”

As Shen Luoyan listened to their ‘dad’ and ‘mom’, she was even more confused; yet she knew perfectly well that they were not Du Fuwei’s sons. Nonetheless, she admired their guts in standing up against Du Fuwei’s valor.

Who would have thought that Du Fuwei did not think that they were being disobedient at all? He simply sighed and said, “Let’s not talk about Die will never let you break your heart and artery, I will never believe your nonsense even more. But since the day you left, Die has been really concerned about you. Not only I cannot bear to scold you, I will even recognize you as my own sons, to bear my Du family name.”

How could the two boys believe him? But since he had seen through their ruse, they could not fight him, and they could not slip away either; momentarily they did not know what they ought to do, they were at their wit’s end.

Right this moment, a peal of tender laughter came from the direction of the main lobby. “Du Zongguan, since your naughty sons are not obedient, why don’t you hand them over to be

disciplined by us?”

Everybody was greatly astounded; who in their right mind, after knowing that they were dealing with Du Fuwei, still dare to pick lice on the tiger’s head?

Without even turning his head, Du Fuwei said, “Who’s coming? State your identity and origin, let’s see if you have enough qualifications to manage Ol’ Du’s inferior sons.”

Two women, one tall one short, appeared about three zhang away from Du Fuwei’s back. One of them said, “Protector of the law Shan Xiu and Shan Yudie of Dong Ming Pai of Ryukyu are here to see Du Zongguan.”

Du Fuwei was greatly astonished, “Dong Ming Pai has always been specializing in weapons sale, and has never directly intervened the dispute internal to the Central Plains. I wonder what is the reason you came to care about my two children.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling also ‘you looked at me, I looked at you’. They were both delighted and anxious at the same time. Delighted because they were finally found by the Law Protector Fairy [orig. xianzi – immortals] of Dong Ming Sect; anxious because they were afraid the women would not be a match for this old dad, who ought to be considered the most terrifying man in the world.

Whether in terms of facial feature, skin and physique, these two women were totally unlike the image of fairies in average people's imagination; however, although they were not standing by the foot of a beautiful hill like how the fairies are usually depicted, these women were definitely anything but ordinary.

Shan Xiu was lanky; so skinny that she looked like a layer of skin wrapped around bones, yet her height was comparable to Du Fuwei. Her hair was tied into a bun on top of her head, her eyes looked spirited, yet they also looked dull, her robe looked too big for her body. It would be strange indeed if people came across her in the middle of the night at a desolate area outside a town and did not think that she was a wandering ghost.

But she gave people the impression that she was clean and tidy, so clean and dry that she was immune to any plague that might harm her.

Shan Yudie, on the other hand, was a plump butterfly [yu die means jade butterfly]. She was a full head shorter than Shan Xiu, and in term of age, she appeared more than ten years younger than Shan Xiu; her face round like a full moon, giving people the impression that she was warm and affable. It was hard to imagine that she was a leader-level martial art expert of Dong Ming Sect.

But the most noticeable was the flexible steel rope, made of steel pieces linked together, that were hanging loosely on their

waists. It was a singular weapon that was very hard to make well. Dong Ming Sect's fame in weapon manufacturing shook the heavens. These two unique flexible steel ropes were naturally not commonplace items.

It was the very first time for everybody in the hall to see the two martial art masters protector of the law, so they all showed the weird expression 'oh, so this is what they look like' on their faces.

The tall and withered Shan Xiu spoke dryly, "These two boys have shown kindness to our humble Sect by giving us warning, so that our humble Sect escaped the disaster of Yuwen Huaji's sneak attack. If Du Zongguan is willing to be magnanimous, our humble Sect will definitely pay you back."

This speech was very polite; she was giving Du Fuwei enough face.

Yet without even thinking Du Fuwei sighed and said, "Please forgive the Ol' Du for not complying to your request. Two fairies, please go back!"

Ren Meimei, Xiang Gui, and the others were greatly confounded. It should be noted that Dong Ming Sect wielded tremendous power as the world leading weapon supplier. With their support, Du Fuwei's contention for hegemony over the

world would enjoy tremendous boost. However, for the sake of two nameless boys [orig. their names not encountered in the classics] he flatly refused Dong Ming Law-protector Fairy's proposal. This has puzzled them greatly even after they pondered over it hundreds of time in their mind.

At the same time, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling seemed to hear Madame Dong Ming's familiar voice in their ears, giving directions.

Shan Xiu also grimly heaved a sigh and said, "We don't have any choice but to make our move to see your real skill."

Right this moment, Du Fuwei already made his move. His target was Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling.

After his experience last time, how could he be careless again?

While the solid wood gambling table shattered into small pieces like sand and stones, he darted toward the two boys.

Suddenly thousands of sword tips shot out from Shen Luoyan's hand, she was attacking Du Fuwei.

Among the people present, she was the only one who had clear understanding of Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's real background.

When she failed to subdue the two boys before, she was determined to eliminate them. Simply because she wanted to get rid of the contingency factor, namely the ‘Duke Yang Treasure Trove’.

Speaking about the current situation, among the various militias, Wagang Army held the biggest power. But they let if any other party succeeded in obtaining the ‘Duke Yang Treasure Trove’, perhaps the current balance of power would experience huge changes. Therefore, she would rather have the two boys killed and the secret would be like a stone thrown into the sea and sank without leaving any trace.

This moment, other than Dong Ming Sect’s strong backing, she also relied on Zu Junyan and other martial experts under her command; how could she let Du Fuwei get hold of the two boys?

In the meantime, Ren Meimei and others were retreating outside the hall.

Du Fuwei already anticipated that Shen Luoyan would try to stop him. His left sleeve rose up; he swept the perimeter of Shen Luoyan’s sword tips.

Shen Luoyan’s sword tips’ shadow disappeared, leaving just one sword. Fast as lightning the sword floated outward, which was blocked and pushed back by Du Fuwei’s Qiankun [universe]

Sleeve.

Meanwhile Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, together with their chairs, tipped backward and fell onto the floor, and the two of them quickly rolled toward the door on the other side of the room; their movement was so fast than even Du Fuwei was taken aback.

Shan Xiu and Shan Yudie, two great Law-Protector Fairies of Dong Ming Sect, had already flown over. Their hands reached out to their waists, with a flick of their wrist the two flexible steel whips, which were made of eighteen sections of steel pieces as thick as a finger linked together, with total reaching distance about a zhang, shot toward the back of Du Fuwei's head and his back.

As if he had eyes behind his head, Du Fuwei flicked his two sleeves backward, sweeping the tip of the whips.

'Ding! Ding!' Shaken by the amazing strength of his sleeves, Shan Xiu and Shan Yudie were jolted backward.

Seemingly without any effort Du Fuwei has consecutively forced three martial art masters to retreat. Accelerating his body, in an instant he flew toward the two boys who were still rolling on the floor.

While he was thinking that very soon Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling

would fall into his evil clutch, suddenly, ‘Boom!’ There was a loud explosion, followed by a big hole appeared on the wall. As if the sand and stones had eyes, they were shooting toward Du Fuwei.

For the first time that evening Du Fuwei showed some concerns on his face. Failed to grab the two boys, his arms swirled around, creating myriad of sleeve shadows, blocking the sand and stones and sending them shooting back toward the hole.

At the same time he pursed his lips to send out a sharp whistle to summon his escorts, the ten martial art experts who were surrounding that place to render their assistance.

‘Boom!’ Unexpectedly another explosion on the tiled roof opened up another big hole. A flicker of the sword tip appeared. Like a rainbow the sword shot from above toward the tianling [heaven spirit] acupoint on the top of Du Fuwei’s head.

A biting cold sword aura completely enveloped Du Fuwei, blocking his entire advance and retreat paths, the power was extremely overbearing. Even with Du Fuwei’s ability, his only way out was to abandon his intention to jump through the hole where Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling escaped, and focusing all his strength to deal with this terrifying sword.

‘Boom!’ Sleeves and sword collided, emitting a muffled-thunder like explosion as the qi and the sword force struck each other.

Like a puff of white cloud something swept across the air about a zhang away, before slowly descending into the hall below. It was a stunningly beautiful woman, with the sword in her hand pointing to Du Fuwei's direction.

With jade face and vermillion lips, her tender and beautiful body seemed to radiate youthful vigor. Her shiny, jet-black beautiful hair was in stark contrast to her snow-white skin, so that her jade bone and ice-sculpture muscle became even more prominent; in short, she was extremely alluring.

It's just that her hair was tied into a bun on top of her head like a man, wrapped in a white warrior band; but her countenance, disposition and complexion shamed even Shen Luoyan.

Du Fuwei actually thought that the one attacking him must be Madame Dong Ming, so when he looked closer, he was taken aback. "Attacking Miss, who are you?" he asked in astonishment.

The sound of fighting also came from the middle hall. Evidently his men were also being intercepted by the enemy. Plus Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling has already gone out of the hole and disappeared without any trace. And Shen Luoyan and the two Law-Protector Fairies were standing about three zhang away watching him.

The beautiful woman cast an indifferent look toward Du Fuwei. Soon afterwards her beautiful eyebrows frown slightly; quite naturally her face showed a displeased expression that would make other people not dare to offend her. She replied in gentle voice, “Wanbei [junior/younger generation] Shan Wanjing; much obliged to experience Du Zongguan’s ultimate skill.”

A deep, cold murderous aura flashed through Du Fuwei’s eyes as he nodded and said, “Turns out it’s the Dong Ming Princess; it’s not surprising that you have such a skill.”

And then he turned his gaze toward the hole from where Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling escaped. “I have long heard that the fame of Madame Dong Ming’s Shui Yun Xiu Fa [water and cloud sleeve technique] is resounding far and wide all over the world,” he spoke in deep voice, “Since you have arrived, why not come down to the battle field to let the Ol’ Du experiencing it once. Otherwise the Ol’ Du will go all-out and offend your thousand-catty gold [i.e. daughter].”

Just by these few sentences, Shan Wanjing was extremely proud. Among the present day Jianghu characters, how many have enough qualifications to make Du Fuwei goes all-out?

Madame Dong Ming’s gentle and beautiful, deep and magnetic voice was heard from the hole, “Du Zongguan is angry, but why? My Dong Ming Pai has always been attaching most importance to

gratitude and grudges. Gratitude must be repaid, grudges must be avenged. For you to cultivate enmity with us, it will simply bring more harm than good toward Du Zongguan's great undertaking. Besides, Zongguan has made quite a bit of unwise moves tonight, your acute spirit has been broken; won't it be better to transform a thousand spears into jade silk, and we all could end this matter amiably?"

Du Fuwei shivered inwardly; in all honesty, he did feel stupid and was greatly discouraged. Not to mention he had revealed his whereabouts, whatever happened he must not stay too long in this place, where the imperial forces still held much power; yet he must not reveal this predicament. After pondering for half a day, he threw his head backward and laughed heartily, "Very well! I, Du Fuwei, am also a man who is capable to distinguish gratitude and grudges. This matter will be repaid. Madame, please!"

His shadow flashed, he was already in the middle hall, where a series of blood-curling screech was heard, but died down very soon afterwards.

While Shen Luoyan's countenance was changing, the three Dong Ming Sect women leaped up through the roof, and Zu Junyan rushed in. He said with a sigh, "He killed five of our men before running away."

Shen Luoyan has already predicted this result; her expression

stayed the same as she said in low voice, “Notify Duke Mi immediately, if we can intercept and kill him before he reaches River Huai, we will gain at least a quarter of the world [reminder: tian xia – China].

Her beautiful eyes turned toward the hole on the wall, to the rear courtyard outside, where the moon and the stars shone their light. Her mind wandered to the two boys, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, who evoked a faint feeling of compassion and regret like a mist shrouding her thought.

Although she had made up her mind to kill the two boys, it was only for the sake of the present situation; the fact was that a favorable impression had started to grow in her heart. Subtle, but it was there.

These two boys were indeed very special and wonderful people.

Book 3 Chapter 9 – Dong Ming Princess

The fast boat left the shore and sped up toward the Dong Ming flagship anchored in the middle of the river. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were sitting in the bow, the one rowing the boat was another Dong Ming Sect's Law-protector Fairy, Shan Qing, who was sizing the two boys up with a smile on her face, but did not say anything.

After passing spreads of cattails near the shore and weaving through dense mooring ships and boats, the lanterns of Dong Ming flagship illuminated the boat.

Under the lantern light, they could see that although Shan Qing, whose sleeves were floating in the wind, was only thirty-percent beautiful, this kind of atmosphere kind of accentuate her mysterious side.

Trying to flatter her, Kou Zhong blurted out, "Xianzi Jiejie [fairy sister], you look so pretty!"

Naturally Shan Qing knew that he was kissing her @ss; she smiled and said, "Don't be loquacious, Madame really hates kids who spout nonsense endlessly. If you provoke her, you won't feel good at all."

Displeased, Xu Ziling said, "Don't think that since you saves us, you can treat us anyway you want ... ow!" Kou Zhong elbowed his arm. Immediately he remembered their heavy responsibility toward Li Shimin, and shut his mouth at once.

Naturally Shan Qing did not know the twists and turns in this matter, she

moored the boat onto the Dong Ming flagship. After leading the two boys to the ship, immediately she ordered her subordinates to get ready to set sail.

Greatly astounded, Kou Zhong asked, "It's late, where are we going?"

At this time a young, handsome man in white, leading two middle age men, appeared in front of the three people to welcome the two boys.

Shan Qing said, "Our Dong Ming Pai is divided into two departments, men and women. The women take Shan as our surnames, the men are surnamed Shang. If you join our Sect in the future, you would also change your surname to Shang."

The young man in white spoke indifferently, "Zaixia Shang Ming." And then he introduced the two middle age men with majestic appearance, one was Shang Bang, the other Shang Kuitai.

Shan Qing calmly said, "Our women department have four great Law-Protector Fairies, the men also have four Sect-Protector Generals. The other two are Shang Ren and Shang Wannian, who presently are not here."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling really wanted to ask Shang Ming's capacity, but looking at Shang Ming's cold and indifferent attitude, they quickly swallowed their question back.

Shan Qing ordered the two boys, "You'd better stay in your cabin. Yuwen Clan's martial art masters have already caught wind of your whereabouts, the situation is extremely dangerous."

Remembering their big enmity with Yuwen Huaji, the two boys jumped in fright, and obediently followed another man in white into their cabin.

The two boys followed the man toward the passenger deck. The familiar hallway appeared before their eyes. They were hoping the man would take them to the lower deck, but the man continued on to the room at the end of the hallway, pushed the door open and invited them to come in.

“Are two Gongzi hungry?” he asked.

Reminded by him, the two boys’ tummy immediately rumbled thunderously; they nodded their head vigorously.

The man laughed and said, “Two Gongzi please take a rest a bit, I will be back with two baskets of steamed stuffed buns.”

Xu Ziling gratefully asked, “How may we address Dashu [big uncle]?”

“Why don’t you just call me Uncle Liu?” the man replied.

After the man left, the two boys closed the door and went to the window. They could not even describe their feeling.

Xu Ziling said in low voice, “This Dong Ming Pai is so strange, the men all take the same surname, all the women are also surnamed Shan; apparently their organization is very tight. It also seems like they are trying to pull us to become a member; this is really hard to understand.”

With a soft chuckle Kou Zhong said, “Why do you care his mother’s that much? As long as we can steal the account book and jump into the river, we will all go our separate ways. But we must remember not to soak the account book and damage it, then perhaps we could use it to bring harm to Yuwen Huagu. One move, two gains; what can you have against it?”

Xu Ziling replied with a wry smile, “It’s easy for you to say. Anybody in here could beat us senseless at will.”

Sneering, Kou Zhong said, “I am telling you to steal, not to rob or fight. What are you afraid of?”

At this time a young maid came bringing some delicacies; she was not the beautiful maid who took them to see Madame Dong Ming the other day, in term of beauty, she was two notches below.

After the main left, the two boys bent over the table, munching busily. By the time they finished eating and the food still left a rich aftertaste, the huge ship shuddered and started to sail.

Kou Zhong looked out the window and saw that the ship was heading toward the northern channel. "Hey! Why go north instead of west?" he exclaimed, "Going this way we will reach the Weishan Lake soon."

Xu Ziling pulled him back, "Don't shout and yell, alright?" he said, "That Madame Dong Ming is so formidable; even Ol' Die cannot stand against her."

Kou Zhong sat down on the seat by the window. He drank a cup of hot tea and voiced his agreement, "Since we set sail, naturally she, the Senior, has safely returned."

Seeing Xu Ziling was still frowning hard, he asked in surprise, "What are you thinking?"

Xu Ziling dejectedly said, "Although we can brandish sabers and play with swords like an expert, our mental cultivation is actually very low. Remember when we were at the casino, only after that Shen woman pressed her hands on our shoulders, we, two fools, knew that she had arrived. How could genuine martial art masters be that useless?"

Kou Zhong agreed. He nodded and said, "We indeed don't have enough mental cultivation, and don't have enough Jianghu ... hey! Not Jianghu, just don't have enough martial art master's experience. Our, two brothers' days as martial art masters are just too short, most of the days we don't even remember that we are martial art masters."

While Xu Ziling was roaring in laughter, there was a knock on the door. The two boys were greatly embarrassed, because even when they were talking about it, they did not detect someone was already at the door.

Kou Zhong cleared his throat and said, "Come in!"

The door opened; a pretty face as beautiful as a flower appeared first to greet, “Gongzi, how are you?” before her beautiful body followed into the room. It was the beautiful maid who took them to see Madame Dong Ming the other day.

The two boys immediately stood up to greet her.

The beautiful maid’s elegant eyes brightened as she cheerfully said, “You have grown tall. Compared to the last time, your expressions are a lot better.”

A friendly feeling welled up in Kou Zhong’s heart; grinning, he said, “Is it because we are wearing rather decent clothes that we appear taller? Plus we now have a couple pennies in our possession, hence we are a bit prouder.”

The pretty maid covered her mouth as she said with a laugh, “Kou Gongzi loves to joke a lot, Xu Gongzi is a lot more proper than you are.”

Kou Zhong broke into laughter, “That is because he has yet to show you his true face!”

Xu Ziling asked in surprise, “Jiejie even know our names and surnames?”

The pretty maid acted as if she suddenly realized that she had talked too much; holding back her smile, she said softly, “Right now all levels of society have been turned upside-down by you. Only the deaf have not heard about your feat and your background. Alright! I am going to take you to see Madame.”

Suddenly she broke into giggle and said, “This time don’t reveal your greedy and corrupt true nature anymore.”

Kou Zhong came over and leaned his face brazenly close to her pretty face and asked, “What is Jiejie’s beautiful name?”

Surprised by this show of intimacy, the pretty maid’s face revealed an angry, but not quite angry, captivating expression. She spoke in low voice, “It’s not a big deal for you to talk flirtatiously like that, but when talking to Madame, you must never make an unreasonable scene. Ay! The one I am most worried about is

Miss; her impression on you is down to the dirt.”

Xu Ziling knitted his sword-like eyebrows and said, “We are not going to ask any favor from them, why must we conduct ourselves according to their likes and dislikes?”

The pretty maid sighed and said, “Because I know you are people with true feeling and true nature, that’s why I told you this. In a lot of other things I am bound by our Sect’s rules and cannot tell you. As long as you are a bit more careful, you ought to be able to go through everything safely.”

“What exactly is the danger?” Kou Zhong wondered, “Hey! This time Madame rescued us and brought us back, is it because she want to select a husband for her daughter?”

The pretty maid was shocked, “How could you think that far?” she asked, “The candidate for Princess’ husband has been chosen long ago.”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “In that case, it must be because she wanted to choose a husband for you, Jiejie.”

The pretty maid blushed beet red; she said angrily, “You keep blabbering nonsense; just see if I am going to ignore you or not.”

Xu Ziling also felt that Kou Zhong was a bit excessive; he frowned and said, “Kou Zhong, can’t you talk with a bit more propriety?”

Kou Zhong shrugged his shoulders and said, “This is called curiosity. Jiejie is so pretty, and I am not yet married; can’t I ask the question?”

Even the pretty maid’s small ears were blushing through and through as she cast an angry glare toward Kou Zhong. But then she bowed her head and said, “I do not really blame him, but I already have a betrothed, it’s just that he has not passed through the doorway [i.e. marry into a family]!”

The two boys were shocked, “He has not passed through the doorway?”

The pretty maid clearly did not wish to continue this conversation. "Come!" she said in low voice, "Follow me to see Madame!" And she preceded them toward the door.

The two boys ran after her. When they got to the door, just before she pushed the door open, the pretty maid halted her steps and said softly, "Remember, my name is Shan Ruyin."

The two boys went to the same big cabin where they met Madame Dong Ming the other day. The pretty maid Ruyin withdrew after she had them sit down on the chairs facing the bamboo curtain.

The two boys looked at each other while waiting painfully for half a day before Madame Dong Ming's gentle voice came from the dark area behind the curtain, "We see each other again."

The two boys respectfully replied, "Madame, how are you?"

Madame Dong Ming was quiet for a moment before speaking, "I was mistaken that day; turns out your skill is not bad at all."

Kou Zhong modestly replied, "Madame praises us too much. Our skill is not even enough to defend ourselves; it can't be considered anything."

Madame Dong Ming spoke indifferently, "Toward such a martial art expert like Du Fuwei, how many people actually dare to speak up to defend themselves? It was only by exploiting all kinds of circumstances, and by deliberately forgetting my intention that I was lucky enough to snatch you from his hands. But time and again you were able to escape from his grip. Just by this fact alone is enough to have your name shook the Jianghu."

Although hearing such praise, the two boys did not feel anything spectacular, because both times they escaped for their lives, they were relying on crafty tricks and their luck; it had nothing to do with actual skill.

Madame Dong Ming suddenly sighed gloomily and said, "I have a question, and I want you to answer me truthfully."

The two boys nodded.

"When people were going to attack us sneakily that night, why did you take the risk by sending us warning?" Madame Dong Ming asked.

"We couldn't just standing by idly and watch," Xu Ziling nonchalantly replied, "We need to teach those bad eggs a lesson! If we had known Madame is this skillful, we should have let Haisha Bang people fall head over heels."

Madame Dong Ming spoke indifferently, "By what qualifications did Haisha Bang people dare to provoke us? But their backing is people with great background. The situation that night was actually very disadvantageous to us. Yuwen Clan's third in command Yuwen Shi personally led their martial art masters to mingle among Haisha Bang people. If they managed to sink our ship, I really don't know what the consequences would be. That's why I am really grateful to you."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were shocked to learn that there were martial art masters from the Yuwen Clan among those people that night.

Madame Dong Ming calmly said, "One question I wasn't clear previously was since the two of you made looking for fame and looking for profit as your life objective, why would you want to do something as dangerous as to offend Yuwen Clan? But just now Ziling has given me the most sincere answer, which is that you couldn't just standing by idly and watch. Hearing that my heart is very happy."

Kou Zhong's thick skin turned red as he said, "Madame praises us too much. There is actually another reason: we heard that guy Han Pudi said that they were under Yuwen Huagu's order. And Yuwen Huagu happens to be our biggest enemy. Therefore, while we have the opportunity, why not try to inflict some harm on him?"

For the first time ever Madame Dong Ming lost her calm and broke into

laughter, “Han Pudi, Yuwen Huagu, what an interesting name you could come up with. Incidentally, I want to warn you: after Yuwen Huagu was injured by Luo Cha woman, he went into hiding for a year to recuperate. My understanding is that his martial art skill has advanced by leaps and bounds instead; right now he is on par with the Clan leader Yuwen Shang. Therefore, if you are not sure, you must never provoke him.”

The two boys declined to comment, but they did not take her advice to heart either, simply because they knew that even if Yuwen Huagu’s martial art skill remained unchanged, they were still too far inferior from him.

Madame Dong Ming continued, “I am so glad that in claiming the credit for yourselves you are not arrogant and are very forthcoming. When you were being chased by the mob at the pier by the city of Yuhang that day, I have already seen that your foundation is exceptional, indeed it is rarely seen in this age. Other than one person from the Li Clan, nobody else of your generation can compare to you. As a result I was moved by the love of talent and let you come aboard to meet in person.”

Kou Zhong replied with a bitter laugh, “But in the end we were driven out by Madame.”

Madame Dong Ming said, “It was not me who wanted you to leave, it was my daughter Wanjing. The people she hates the most are worldly disciples who are only after wealth and fame. Nowadays my duties within the Sect are gradually being taken over by her, I just assume the responsibility to give guidance; hence everything is decided by her.”

The two boys suddenly understood why Ruyin said that Dong Ming Princess’ impression on them was very bad.

Madame Dong Ming sighed and said, “This daughter of mine is stubborn; once she had a preconception about anything, it is very difficult to change her mind. But surprisingly this time it was she who found you; furthermore, she gave the order to give you assistance.”

She did not understand, naturally the two boys did not understand even more;

they merely listened attentively.

Madame Dong Ming changed the subject, “Whether it’s Du Fuwei, Li Mi, and perhaps Yuwen Huaji, or even all gangs and societies who know your whereabouts, nobody is willing to give up on you. Do you have any plan for the future?”

The two boys shook their heads with blank expression on their face, indicating that they had no idea.

Madame Dong Ming’s voice was a bit emotional as she spoke tenderly, “Before we learned about your involvement in the conflict concerning ‘Secret to Long Life’ and ‘Duke Yang’s Treasure Trove’, we did have the intention of absorbing you into our Sect to strengthen our men department, but now I changed my mind. But please don’t think that it is because we are afraid to be implicated in this matter, rather, we are afraid to waste the kind of talent that you have. I don’t know whether it’s the Heaven’s will, but your suffering is actually a great opportunity for you to learn by experience. In just over a year, you have shed your mortal body and exchange your bones and become new persons. The most amazing thing is you are able to make your expression [or shen qi - ‘divine qi’] understated, which is the realm where only genuine martial art masters are able to attain. Obviously your internal energy level is not high, but you can definitely accomplish it. Give it a little more time, your achievement will be beyond measure.”

The two boys jumped in fright; they thought that if they could not stay, wouldn’t they lose the opportunity to carry out their trick ‘to imitate the dog and steal the chicken’?

But Madame Dong Ming continued, “By midday tomorrow, we will arrive at Weishan Lake. After taking care of some businesses, we can go up north along the canal. After Juye Wetlands, the water should be covered by mist for hundreds of li, we can easily shake off enemy’s pursuit; there we can arrange for you to slip away onto the shore. After that you will have to rely on your good luck.”

The two boys were relieved; within these next eight to ten days, they should be able to complete the heavy responsibility Li Shimin entrusted to them.

From a very deep slumber, Xu Ziling slowly, fen by fen [1 fen 1/3cm, 1/8-in], cun by cun [1 cun 1-in] regained his consciousness.

The feeling was like from the bottom of a deep, dark and quiet pool, gradually floating to the surface, and the instant he made contact with the water surface was the same instant he regained the perception of the outside world.

Every night when he slept peacefully was the good time he practiced the 'Secret to Long Life'.

'Thump!' Kou Zhong, who was sleeping next to him, kicked the side of his thigh.

Xu Ziling was already accustomed to this. Whenever Kou Zhong kicked him, a burst of true qi immediately entered his channels, while at the same time he also returned a stream of true qi back to Kou Zhong.

This kind of feeling was really unspeakably comfortable.

When sleeping, Kou Zhong always kept moving, while Xu Ziling always stayed calm like a deep sea.

The sun outside penetrated the window, bathing the small empty space in front of the window with its light; everything seemed so peaceful, serene and beautiful.

Xu Ziling's mind was a piece of peacefulness, just like a calm deep pool, mirroring everything before his eyes. He looked up at the rectangular-shaped mosquito net above the bed. The net was made of silk yarn weaved together into a mesh; abundant with some kind of principle that was hard to describe with words, rich with many patterns. What seemed to be identical square holes were actually myriads of different holes. Each small hole, each small square actually had subtle differences with each other. Light and darkness, big and small, they were all different. Yet all these different holes formed a whole entity that could not be broken; each hole was independent, yet they also affecting each other.

He had never thought that a mosquito net could be so engaging and interesting.

‘Buzz! Buzz!’ A buzzing noise came from the top of the net. A mosquito wanted to break into the net, but was thwarted by the mesh and was kept outside.

After trying several times, the mosquito flew toward a corner. Immediately it attracted the attention of a house lizard that was crouching on the patterned ceiling above. The lizard rapidly traversed several feet across, and lay prostrate again, motionless.

The lizard’s movement was both steady and nimble, there was dynamic within the static, and there was static within the dynamic.

Xu Ziling’s heart was filled with indescribable feeling; somehow he indistinctly captured the true meaning of the blend between static and dynamic.

Suddenly this incomparably rich and moving moment was broken by light footsteps from a distance coming near. The footsteps stopped in front of the door, and then the door was pushed open.

Kou Zhong instantly reacted; he opened his eyes and sat up.

The two boys focused their attention, and saw that it was a big and tall maid. She looked quite ugly, but the saddest thing about her was the ‘thousand-li distant’ expression on her face, icy-cold and wooden, as if everybody in the world owed her money and has not paid her back.

As soon as she came in, her gaze swept the boys behind the net, and then she looked away as if she lost interest already. She brought along a basin of water, a towel, a comb, and other things, which she then placed on a small table by the window. And then, without any trace of politeness she barked with her hoarse voice, “Quickly get up! Commander Ming [orig. shuai – commander-in-chief] is waiting for you for breakfast.”

The two boys exchanged glances; they wondered which divine being this 'Commander Ming' was.

Kou Zhong crawled out of the net and went over to the ugly maid. Cupping his fist in respect he inquired, "How may I address this Jiejie?"

The ugly maid spoke with disdain, "I am not your Jiejie, and you don't need to pay attention to my name."

Meanwhile Xu Ziling pushed the net aside and sat on the bedside; he was stooping down to look for his boots. Hearing what was said, he said, "If we made any mistakes, Jiejie is welcome to scold us or curse us, so that we can make it right."

The ugly maid did not expect the two boys would still be modest and polite even after her mean treatment to them. She stared blankly for a moment before finally walking toward the door. "I'll wait for you outside," she said. Her tone was a little gentler.

The two boys hurriedly wore their clothes and washed their faces.

By the time they walked out the door, the ugly maid impatiently said, "Hurry up and follow me!"

Kou Zhong giggled and ran after her. In the most respectful manner he said, "May I ask Jiejie, who is Commander Ming?"

The ugly maid led them to the end of the hallway where the stairs leading to the upper deck was located. She appeared to be ignoring Kou Zhong, but then she suddenly said in cold manner, "Didn't you see him yesterday?"

Kou Zhong, and Xu Ziling who was running behind him, suddenly came to realization that the Commander Ming she was talking about was Shang Ming. Since they had 'generals', it was only natural that they also had 'Commander-in-chief'. It seemed that this young, handsome Shang Ming's status in Dong Ming Sect was, by no means, low.

Climbing to the upper deck, they found out that it was actually a spacious cabin, almost like a hall. Shang Ming, accompanied by Shang Bang and Shang Kuitai, two men, sat around a round table, where an assortment of light breakfast food was served, talking in low voice.

Seeing the two boys' arrival, Shang Ming did not stand up or show any sign of welcoming gesture at all; he simply smiled unenthusiastically and said, "Two Xiao Xiongdi, please have a seat."

After the two boys took their seats, the ugly maid left the hall.

The cabin was decorated with over a dozen big windows on both sides, adorned with hanging curtains, but did not affect their view at all. They could still enjoy the panoramic view of the green mountains and verdant pastures scenery on both banks of the river.

"Did the two gentlemen sleep well last night?" Shang Bang asked.

The two boys had already stuffed their mouth full with food, so they could only nod their head.

Shang Kuitai said, "There are two sichen more [i.e. 4 hours] before we reach Weishan Lake. Once we get there, we have no fear of being tracked."

Shang Ming said, "The weapons that you use, where did you buy them? The material and craftsmanship are quite good."

Of course Kou Zhong could not tell him the truth, he randomly replied, "It's Shen Luoyan, that woman [derogatory] who gave them to us."

How could Shang Ming be able to distinguish whether he was telling the truth or a lie? He could not help laughing, "There are not many people in Jianghu who dare to call her 'woman'. The two of you can be considered having enough skill that there are a lot of Jianghu characters, that many people would be scared at the mere mention of their names [orig. turn pale at the mention of a tiger], are

hunting you down, yet time and again you were able to escape with your lives. 'Being fugitives for thousand li', it can also be considered 'anecdote passed on with approbation' in Jianghu."

Xu Ziling was curious, "What kind of place is Ryukyu?" he asked.

Shang Ming proudly replied, "It's the world's most beautiful and mysterious place. It's a big island suspended over emptiness of the vast body of water. The climate is pleasant, large part of it remains uncultivated fertile land, wonderful birds and different animals can be seen everywhere.

The two boys listened with their minds wandering far away.

Shan Kuitai asked, "Was your martial art skill taught by the Luocho female?"

Kou Zhong nodded, "That is correct!"

"If that is the case," Shang Bang seriously commented, "It can clearly be seen that Gaoli's Yi Jian Dashi [see Book 1 Chapter 3] Fu Cailin really possesses inscrutable, supernatural skill."

Shang Ming said, "People have name, trees have shadow. Since Fu Cailin was able to make his name alongside Wu Zun Bi Xuan and Shan Ren Ning Daoqi [all these names were mentioned back in Book 1 Chapter 6], and still enduring for the last few decades, they must have earth-shatteringly ultimate skill. Just look at how he sent one of his disciples over, and she had the Central Plains' Wulin world in complete confusion [orig. sky and earth turning upside down]; even Yuwen Huaji was injured and forced to return. Clearly he has real talent and is a solid material."

Remembering Fu Junchuo, the two boys' throat choked and they did not feel like eating anymore.

This moment the ugly maid returned. Shang Ming and the others, all three people revealed a disgusted look on their faces.

The ugly maid saluted, and then hoarsely and crudely said, "Princess wants to see Xu Ziling."

Kou Zhong was baffled, "What about me?" he asked.

The ugly maid shook her head coldly, but did not say anything.

Shang Ming and the others also showed a surprised look; especially Shang Ming, his expression looked quite unnatural.

"Why haven't you followed me?" the ugly maid urged.

Having no other choice, Xu Ziling shrugged his shoulders.

Finally Xu Ziling set his foot on the cabin deck below the main deck. On the surface there did not seem to be any differences; there was also a long corridor, with more than a dozen doors lining both sides of the hallway, but the decoration was a lot more exquisite. From the ceiling of the hallway hung down more than a dozen delicate chandeliers, shining their lights on decorative pattern carved subtly along the wall of the hallways. Underneath his feet was plain green carpet embroidered with geometric patterns like moss on grass, like uninhabited, calm and quiet meadows.

The ugly maid led the way silently, until they arrived at the door at the end of the hallway, where she turned around and said, "You wait here. When Princess is ready to see you, she will call you."

Finished speaking, she left.

Xu Ziling thought in his heart that this Dong Ming Princess really had a big ego; if she did not have time to talk, she could always summon him a bit later.

Up to this moment he still did not understand why Dong Ming Princess wanted to see him alone. But just as quick his mind turned to the account book.

If this account book really did exist, would it be kept in this room?

The door and the walls of this cabin were extremely solid; breaking in would not be easy at all.

While he was indulging himself in flights of fancy, a sweet, tender, but icy-cold voice sounded in his ears, "Come in!"

With curious mind Xu Ziling pushed the door and walked in. His eyes lit up instantly, for this room was unusually spacious, with adequate illumination, and all four walls were lined up with bookshelves and bookcases. There was also a large desk by the window.

A young woman, in the prime of her youth, wearing purple-red clothes, was sitting on the desk with her back facing him, leaning over the desk as if she was hard at work. Her long, shiny, jet-black hair hung down to her back, giving him a soft, delicate and charming feeling.

Xu Ziling bowed to salute and said, "Xu Ziling pays his respect to Princess!"

Turning her head slightly, the woman only gave him a quick, cold glance, before turning her attention back to the desk and continued writing fine and dense characters on the file in front of her.

Xu Ziling, on the other hand, was shaken to his core. Not only because her beauty was extremely startling, but also because she invoked a familiar feeling, as if he had seen her not too long ago.

The glance she was giving him just a moment ago exuding some kind of loathing look, which made Xu Ziling felt even more that something was not quite right.

This moment he was standing behind her back, staring blankly; he felt that speaking was inappropriate, leaving was even more not appropriate; he was in a very awkward situation.

Dong Ming Princess' voice was heard, "Why switch from arrogance to deference? Just based on this fact alone, it is clear to me that you are a despicable man."

Xu Ziling was startled, "Have I really met Princess?" he asked.

Dong Ming Princess Shan Wanjing suddenly stood up and turned around. Her beautiful and elegant eyes were shooting deep hatred as she stared mercilessly at him, "Aren't you Zhang San or Li Si? How come you have forgotten this easily?"

Xu Ziling was shaken. "My Niang, so it is you!" he exclaimed.

Yesterday the two boys had just arrived at Pengcheng, they went to a restaurant to have a meal, and came across a woman who disguised herself as a man. They thought she was an enemy sent by Shen Luoyan to swindle them, hence they treated her without any trace of politeness at all. How could they know that unexpectedly she was the Dong Ming Princess in his presence right now?

Involuntarily Xu Ziling's eyes wandered toward her pair of long legs, which evoked his memory.

"What are you looking at?" Shan Wanjing angrily said.

Agape and tongue-tied, Xu Ziling stammered, "I ... hey! The other day we thought ..."

Shan Wanjing regained her calm instead; she said indifferently, "No need to explain; even if you do, I won't listen to you. I called you to come here this time, is because I want to tell you in person that even though you have given our Sect a huge favor, but we have also saved you, the two little kids, from Du Fuwei's hands. Tit for tat, let's consider we are even."

Seeing that she treated him as the enemy, and was unwilling to listen to explanation, Xu Ziling was rather put off by her capricious muleheadedness. Yet

looking at her poetry-like, sunshine-like, graceful and alluring jade countenance, he simply could not get angry with her. He could only waved his hand in a 'not-a-big-deal' way and said, "It is best that we consider it even, then we all go our separate ways; hereafter clear gratitude and absolute justice have nothing to do with each other. Ha!"

The last 'ha!' exclamation was because he recalled that the last sentence was Kou Zhong's pet phrase.

But Shan Wanjing's jade countenance turned cold; she spoke furiously, "Gratitude is considered done, now is the time we ought to consider the grudges."

Xu Ziling was shocked, "What grudges to consider?" he asked.

Shan Wanjing took a deep breath and said, "I really don't understand why Niang thinks so highly of you, two kids who are covered all over with vulgarity. The first time I saw you, I already loathe you."

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "If elegance and vulgarity became the criteria, we certainly don't have any qualifications to be measured by Princess' elegant eyes. But if Princess uses elegance and vulgarity to determine gratitude and grudges, I am afraid Princess would have grudges against most people walking down the street."

Actually, even Shan Wanjing herself did not understand why she had so much hatred toward the dignified young man in front of her. "Don't blather!" she angrily said, "I am referring to the insulting remark you hurled at me the other day. Others greeted you politely with good intention, yet you unexpectedly could be that rude."

Xu Ziling breathed a sigh of relief, "This will be easier to deal with," he said, "That day was just a misunderstanding. We thought ..." His gaze landed on the desktop, immediately he was shaken and shut his mouth.

Heavens! Isn't that the account book we are supposed to steal?

But Dong Ming Princess thought that he was unable to put forward any convincing arguments, so it was hard for him to continue. Her face turned as cold as water as she said, "You have nothing to say then don't say it! Now I am going to strike you with one palm, the target will be the pit of your stomach. If you cannot evade it, you'll pay for it with your life."

Xu Ziling came to his senses. Terrified, he said, "We did not have past enmity, we do not have current hatred, Princess must not use violence."

Shan Wanjing calmed down. She said indifferently, "I am about to strike."

Xu Ziling was so scared he took two steps back; waving his hand he said, "Any problem we can talk it over slowly. Ah!"

Shan Wanjing's body suddenly shot forward with raised right palm; lightly it floated indeterminately toward the pit of his stomach.

Xu Ziling did not have time to think; focusing his attention to the palm, he saw that this jade palm, which appeared, soft and powerless, without raising any gust of wind at all, as if she only wanted to touch him, was actually following certain subtle striking trajectory toward him, yet it continuously changed, so that it was very difficult to pin down.

The strange thing was that he seemed to be able to clearly grasp her changes, so much so that he could grasp her next move.

But he also knew that if he let her hit the pit of his stomach, he might really die, finished, met his worst fate.

Right in this moment between life and death, he did not dare to be careless. His broadsword left its scabbard and lightning fast it chopped toward her jade palm.

Shan Wanjing let out a cold sneer and darted faster forward, while raising her left hand high, the back of her hand swept across the blade of the saber; it was indeed a very ruthless move in close-combat.

Who would have thought that Xu Ziling's saber suddenly changed direction? He abruptly pulled out the back of the saber to slice the opening on the wrist of her right palm, which has not changed its attacking direction.

Shan Wanjing did not expect him to be able to use the saber with such agility. If she wanted to evade, it would be as easy as a hand's turn; but she already said that she would only send one palm strike, how could she fail to hold on to her words? Clenching her silver teeth, her left hand changed, now she wanted to grab and snatch the blade of the saber, while at the same time she leaned sideways to butt herself against Xu Ziling's chest. Her right hand magically changed into millions of palm shadows; she was unleashing her real skill to the fullest.

Although earlier she said that she had malicious intention, the reality was that she only wanted to beat him up that he would fall with all four limbs facing the sky; hence she could vent the resentment in her heart. But now that she was forced to go all-out, it was hard to attack and defend as she wished.

Xu Ziling recalled the house lizard he saw as he woke up this morning, instinctively he evaded by sliding sideways. Not only Shan Wanjing's left hand grabbed an empty air, his saber actually sliced the millions of her right palm shadows, which filled the air.

Shan Wanjing had never expected that his response was so brilliant and quick; it was even harder for her to hold back. Exerting her most refined, outstanding technique, first, her palm slapped the blade of Xu Ziling's saber and attached itself on it, like a shadow the palm followed wherever Xu Ziling moved his saber; while the back of her other palm struck Xu Ziling on the pit of his stomach.

Xu Ziling let out a miserable scream as he was thrown backward and crashed through the door, until finally he landed on the hallway outside. While he was still on the air he already spurted a mouthful of fresh blood, all the way until he fell heavily on the carpet outside the door.

Shan Wanjing was shocked.

As she was about to run out to see the outcome, Madame Dong Ming's voice already arrived, "What happened?"

Shan Wanjing halted her steps and coldly said, "This man had offended daughter; even he's dead he deserves it."

Madame Dong Ming appeared on the door; she wore a lake-green colored beautiful gown, her beautiful, thick hair was rolled up in a bun high on her head, her overall appearance was graceful and elegant, but her face was covered with a layer of thin gauze, like a dense fog concealing her countenance.

From the other side of the hallway came more voices; apparently the sound of fighting had alerted the others.

After staring at Shan Wanjing for quite a while, Madame Dong Ming looked down to examine Xu Ziling.

After his qi was blocked, Xu Ziling slowly regained his consciousness. When he was struck by her palm a moment ago, he felt as if all the channels in his entire body were about to burst open, the pain was like 'one Buddha came into being, two Buddha ascending the heaven' [not sure what it means], but after sprouting a mouthful of blood, the qi at the sole of his feet was unimpeded, the pain lessened considerably.

Hurriedly he crawled up and while massaging the pit of his stomach, he said with a bitter smile, "I am alright, Princess is indeed formidable. Ha!"

Unexpectedly he laughed and staggered away. The only thing in his mind was that tempting account book lying around on her desk.

At first he did not feel comfortable in this stealing-the-account-book matter, but now he the mental barrier was no longer there.

Book 3 Chapter 10 – The Fire Of War On Lake Wei

While helping Xu Ziling massaging the pit of his stomach, Kou Zhong anxiously asked, “Are you really alright? That female [usually refers to female animal] is really ruthless; just because we were not interested in hanging around with her! Unexpectedly she considered it big grudges and animosity.”

“Can you lower your voice a little bit?” Xu Ziling said in low voice, “If she hears it we will be in trouble. Hey! Let me tell you something amazing. When the true qi in my body started to move, just a short while and I feel better already. If I transferred my qi a bit earlier, perhaps I could easily take her palm strike.”

Kou Zhong said, “In that case this palm strike can be considered something of a value, as long as you don’t die.” And then he remembered something and giggled, “Don’t just look at her as being mean, the fact is that she unconsciously fell in love with you. But because she is already betrothed, and you treated her as a worthless nobody, in her anger she wanted to attack you, hence she made her move and injured you.”

Xu Ziling was not amused, “Go to your Niang! Fall in love with me? This kind of love is not worth mentioning.”

The more Kou Zhong thought, the more he was convinced. He analyzed, “Even if one time you cursed her as a loose woman and had no feeling of shame, hence your offense is more serious than mine, but my treatment to her was not much better. Yet she only looked for you to vent her anger; this kind of girl’s mind is the most difficult to fathom. When you went to see her, that guy Shang Ming could not sit or stand still, his expression turned really weird.”

Xu Ziling seized this opportunity to change the subject, “In that case, that Shang Ming ought to be that evil woman Princess’ husband, who has not yet passed through a doorway [marry into a family, see Book 3 Chapter 9]. Ay! Even if the entire Dong Ming Pai people kneeled in front of me, I can’t possibly join their Sect. Men married into the women’s family, why would I want to do that?”

Kou Zhong laughed and giggled, “The biggest reason is that the women would take care of us.”

And then his expression turned serious as he said, “After we get to Weishan Lake tonight, Madame Dong Ming and that evil woman Princess will go see Li Shimin’s old dad. That will be the time we make our move to steal that thing. From here we climbed down the window, it will be as easy as lifting our hand.”

Meanwhile the scenery outside the window has changed, no longer steep banks and cliffs, but clear and crystalline river water, clumps of white cloud, the far-side bank continued on to open land as far as the eye can see. They have arrived at Weishan Lake.

The door was pushed open. The ugly maid walked in silently, sized Xu Ziling up a moment, and then with her hoarse voice and crude manner she asked, “Are you still in pain?”

Xu Ziling was touched by her concern; he was about to reply that it was not a big deal when Kou Zhong pinched him. Hastily he said, “I think after two days rest I should be alright. Thank you Jiejie for your concern.”

“Who cares about you?” the ugly maid coldly said, “It’s just that tonight Madame wants to eat dinner with you, so she sent me over to check on you! Since you are alright, then that’s it.” Finished speaking she turned around and left.

While the two boys were looking at each other in astonishment, there was a knock on the door, the beautiful maid Ruyin came from outside the door, “May I come in?”

Kou Zhong sprang up and pulled the door open. “Good Jiejie, please come in!” he greeted.

‘Pfft!’ Ruyin broke into tender laughter; she cast a sidelong glance toward Kou Zhong and gracefully walked in. Seeing Xu Ziling was sitting in a chair by the window, without any visible change in her countenance she said in amazement, “Madame is right, although on the surface you look badly injured, actually it is not serious at all.”

Xu Ziling could not bear lying to her; he nodded and said, “Just a bit painful!”

Ruyin came over and stretched out her gentle and soft hand to feel the temperature on his forehead. Pulling her jade hand back, she said, “Your internal energy is so unusual; void and fluttering, so that it’s hard for others to gauge the depth of it.”

Kou Zhong walked over to her, he took that opportunity to lean closer, his nose vigorously sucked in the fragrance of her hair first, before speaking right next to her ear, “This is called ‘unfathomable’.”

Ruyin was displeased, “Can you be more proper? To be honest, my impression on you is not much better than the Princess’. Unexpectedly you hang around with those devoid-of-consciousness Baling Bang people; are you thinking of copying them in doing business in human trafficking?”

Kou Zhong awkwardly said, “We did not know Xiang Yushan was Baling Bang people!”

The more Ruyin spoke, the angrier she was; with arms akimbo she angrily said, “Then why did you go to their casino? Don’t you dare to say that you did not know it was not a casino!”

Seeing her almond eyes grew big in anger, Kou Zhong replied in panic, “We did not know it was a casino, we thought it was a brothel.”

“What?” Ruyin’s voice broke.

It was too late for Kou Zhong to correct himself, he knew he was in trouble. Heaving a deep sigh, he said, "Ay! Jiejie, how could you know our plight that time? We were in a tight spot, and had no choice but to find a place to hide."

Ruyin's pretty face was flushed with anger, "It's just an excuse; the truth was that you wanted to fool around in a place where you wanted to ingratiate yourselves like that. Looking at your fine countenance fine appearance, I could not imagine that you are so corrupt in the inside. Just see if I will pay you any more attention in the future." Stomping her foot, she turned around and walked away.

Kou Zhong reached out trying to get hold of her. Ruyin dodged; her eyes bulging like fish bowl, she screamed, "You dare to touch me with your stinky hand? Princess is right, not many men on earth are good people."

The two boys had never imagined that such a gentle and considerate girl could become this emotional; they stared blankly at her in silence and in fear.

Ruyin's silky breasts heaved up and down rapidly for a moment before calming down. Seeing the two boys who looked like a great catastrophe had just befallen them, her expression softened a little as she said grimly, "I rarely get angry like this; it's all your fault! Alright, if you are willing to promise me that from now on you won't go to that kind of place, I will forgive you!"

Xu Ziling was ready to promise, but Kou Zhong beat him by saying, "In that case won't we have to change our training to Tongzi Gong [virgin boy skill]?"

Ruyin was taken aback, and then her pretty face blushed as she stared hatefully at Kou Zhong before storming out in anger.

'Bang!' as soon as he heard the door slammed, Kou Zhong breathed a sigh of relief. He said, "Fortunately I did not let you give your promise in a rush. Otherwise how could we enjoy life and be merry later?"

Xu Ziling let out a bitter laugh and said, "That's one more person we offended. Right now on this ship, other than Madame Dong Ming, it could be said that we

look up and see no one familiar.”

Kou Zhong sneered and said, “This ship is full of eccentric people, fortunately we are going to leave very soon. Otherwise, sooner or later we will turn into one of them. It’s not a big deal if we don’t go to Ryukyu, I am sure they don’t have half a place where we can have fun.”

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “What do you mean having fun? Every time we wanted to go to a brothel we always came across something shady. Apparently the two of us lack pleasure-house luck.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “I don’t believe in demonic influence. Come! Let us practice our exceptional divine skill, as long as our ears can hear the eight directions, we can carry out our grand plan.” Finished speaking, he started to walk back and forth in the room.

In the hazy dusk of twilight, the Dong Ming flagship sailed at full speed over the mist covered water of Weishan Lake, heading toward a certain destination.

On the ship, a vegetarian feast has been prepared inside the hall of the main cabin. Madame Dong Ming still had her face covered in veil, her entire being was still shrouded in unfathomable mystery.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were sitting on her left and right, respectively.

All three Law-Protector Fairies were present. Shan Yan and Shan Yudie, who dealt with Du Fuwei the other day, were expressionless [I could have sworn that it was Shan Xiu, not Shan Yan]. Only Shan Qing showed a bit of warmth. But obviously everybody strongly disapproved Madame Dong Ming showing such grand hospitality toward two boys whose names not encountered in the classics.

The other attendees included Shang Ming and a senile-looking old man. This old man, Madame Dong Ming called him Shang Gong [gong means ‘grandpa’, ‘father-in-law’, or simply a term of respect to address (much) older man]. His stature was originally big and tall, but his back was crooked. However, the eyes under heavily wrinkled eyelids constantly flickered with strange purple light. He appeared spirited, yet appeared dull at the same time; in short, he was

extremely intimidating.

The other Dong Ming Sect people were very respectful toward him. Other than the first time when he was introduced to the two boys, he did not even look at them. The rest of the time he was simply holding on to the only wine pot on the table, silently pouring himself a drink. Toward the fine vegetarian dishes on the table, he was not even interested in giving it a single glance.

Very soon the two boys even forgot that he was there.

Apparently Shan Wanjing was still angry, so she did not attend.

However, whether it was related to Shan Wanjing or not, Shang Ming seemed to be brimming with hostility; he was even more unfriendly than before.

Ruyin must be Madame Dong Ming's personal maid; she waited on everyone. But she was still fuming with anger; apparently her resentment toward Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had not subsided.

All in all, this meal was not a pleasant one.

At the start of dinner, Madame Dong Ming spoke a few apologetic words on behalf of her daughter, but afterwards she chatted with Shang Ming and the others, leaving the two boys out on the side.

The two boys were already used to this kind of treatment, so they did not give it a damn, but going all-out in wiping out the dishes on the table. However, they were used to eating meat, hence no matter how many dishes were delivered into their belly, it did not give them a sense of satisfaction.

Seeing their table manners, other than Madame Dong Ming and Shang Gong, the rest of the people showed contemptuous look on their faces.

Shang Ming was discussing the changes in the militia situation, "The most worrisome is the Tujue [Turkic] people's tendency. Right now Ying Yang Pai's Liang Shidou and Liu Wuzhou already cast their lots with them, and are

bestowed the titles Magnanimous Pijia Khan and Dingyang Khan, respectively. These two renegades have received Tujue Khan's order to attack Taiyuan. If Li Yuan cannot defend Taiyuan, Tujue will definitely seize the chance to advance; at that time the Central Plains will be in grave danger."

Everybody was paying attention.

Shan Yan said, "Right now the Li Clan is hard-pressed from front and rear, Dugu Clan and Yuwen Clan are dying to have them completely wiped-out. But in this matter nobody could offer any help to them, they could only look at the Li Clan's good luck."

Shan Yudie said, "Fortunately Li Yuan has several good sons, plus Taiyuan is located upstream of River Fen, between Taihang Mountains [on the border between Hebei and Shanxi] and Yellow River, cradled by the mountain and supported by the river, they are squatting on the world's shoulder, with the Hedong as the foundation. They have elite soldiers and ample provisions. On top of that, Li Yuan, father and sons, bestow benevolence far and wide, making friends with heroes everywhere, their influence continuously expanding; they are not a force of only one battle."

Shang Ming objected, "But Li Yuan is an indecisive leader, all along he considers himself as the incapable ruler's aunt's cousin. There will come a day where that incapable ruler will weary him to his death. If I were Li Yuan, I would take advantage while the incapable ruler is redeploying his border guards to deal with Du Fuwei in Jiangdu region, and Wagang Army is occupying the Sui's main force at Luoyang, to advance to the capital and take it, to raise his army in rebellion."

Listening to this, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's hearts were burning; they both thought, 'oh, so the current situation is like that', no wonder Li Shimin wanted it so much for his old dad to rebel.

Shan Qing said, "Too bad we are limited by our ancestors' rule that we must not get involved in the Central Plains' affair. Otherwise when we see Shimin, we can lay out the advantages and disadvantages thoroughly to him."

Madame Dong Ming said indifferently, "If we can see the situation clearly, do you think other people can't? This matter needs not be discussed anymore."

How could anybody dare to continue the discussion?

After an unbearably awkward silence, Shang Gong suddenly looked at Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, two boys. While the two boys grew nervous under his gaze that they could not swallow their food, Shang Gong spoke with his hoarse and hard-to-hear-clearly voice, "Who taught you martial art?"

Kou Zhong braced himself and replied, "It was our Niang!"

"Who's your Niang?" Madame Dong Ming asked in astonishment.

Xu Ziling explained, "His Niang is the same as my Niang, other people called her Luocho female."

Madame Dong Ming said, "Luocho female Fu Junchuo was famous for being vicious and merciless; I did not expect not only she took you as her adopted sons, she even sacrificed herself for you. It can be considered incredible."

The two boys appeared deeply grieved.

Shang Gong shook his head and said, "That's not right! How long have you been training martial art?"

Kou Zhong counted his fingers and gave him an honest answer, "A bit over a year."

Shan Qing and the others revealed a shocked look on their faces. Although their fighting skill did not count for anything, but in just over a year of training, they already had this kind of accomplishment that they were able to take Shan Wanjing's palm strike head-on; it was indeed shocking.

Shang Gong was deep in thought for half a day, and then he sighed and said,

“If you can avoid experiencing fire deviation, in the future you ought to have superb accomplishment.”

Madame Dong Ming said, “Meixian[1] has inspected their qi circulation method, it is actually very vast without any clear boundary. I don’t know where it starts, hence I dispelled the thought of accepting them into our Sect and passing on our skill to them. If Shang Gong has an idea, why not giving them a direction or two?”

Shang Gong only shook his head; he no longer spoke.

Back to their cabin, the two boys felt relieved as if they had just escaped from a trap.

Kou Zhong said in a low voice, “There are too many people ‘who bite the hand that feed them’ on earth; just look at Shang Ming, a dog who relies on its master’s power, he looked at us with disdain while he is acting as if he is sitting high on a pedestal. Ha! Fortunately this Young Master is broad-minded, can’t possibly bicker with him.”

Xu Ziling sneered and said, “If you really don’t care about him, you ought not mention it.”

Kou Zhong slapped his forehead and said, “You are right! From now on, we won’t talk about this guy.”

Xu Ziling said in distress, “How would we know when Madame and the others leave the ship to see that Li guy?”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Isn’t that simple? Whenever the ship stops, that’s when they leave the ship.”

Xu Ziling said, “Supposing Madame invited Li guy to meet on the ship, won’t our dream become an empty dream?”

Kou Zhong was speechless for half a day. Finally he said in low voice, “Let’s not

worry too much, as long as they congregate in the hall above, we will immediately make our move to steal that stuff. Li guy and his old dad's fate is on our hands."

Xu Ziling craned his neck to look out the window. After looking around for quite some time, he pulled his head back and said, "Didn't they say Yuwen Clan people want to mount a sneak attack on Dong Ming flagship? How come there's not even a trace of them?"

"You asked me?" Kou Zhong said, "Then whom should I ask? Huh?"

The sound of the ship suddenly changed; it slowed down. The two boys tensed up; they had to wait patiently.

That night the sky was clear the weather was nice, the crescent moon was hanging low on the horizon, the night view was enchanting.

Under the moonlight and starlight, the Dong Ming flagship slowly docked onto a small lone island in the middle of the lake, where another big ship had already anchored.

The two boys stuck out their heads out the window to look, and recognized that it was Li Shimin's battleship; they grew even more nervous and their hearts were beating rapidly.

When the Dong Ming flagship has come to a complete stop, the two boys crouched down and pressed their ears on the cabin floor, while channeling their energy to listen carefully.

Unexpectedly the cabin below was silent, as if it was a deserted ghost town.

Right this moment, a sigh rang inside the two boys' eardrum.

The two boys sat up in fright, and they both saw that the other's face was devoid of any color.

“That’s Shang Gong’s voice,” Kou Zhong said in horror, “Even if he turned into dust I will still recognize it,”

“How could that old fellow’s sigh be that loud?” Xu Ziling asked, “It sounded like he was sighing next to our ears.”

Kou Zhong took a deep breath and said, “Let’s not worry about it too much. In half the time needed to burn a stick of incense, we will climb down the window to steal, and then use the water to escape.”

The two boys sat back in the chair; waiting with ‘heart alarmed, guts palpitated’.

Suddenly they heard footsteps in the hallway outside, the two boys groaned inwardly. Fortunately nobody came in; very soon the footsteps were getting farther and farther away.

Kou Zhong sprang up and said, “It’s time!”

In this frightening moment, someone knocked on their door. While the two boys were groaning incessantly, the ugly maid’s voice was heard outside the door, “Come out quickly! Princess wants to see you.”

With bitter face the two boys followed the ugly maid down to lower deck and on to the Princess’ study room’s door. Without showing any expression the ugly maid pushed the door open and coldly said, “Come in!”

Without any other choice Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling braced themselves and stepped into the room.

Dong Ming Princess Shan Wanjing was back into wearing men’s clothes, ready and waiting, sitting in a large chair by the desk, looking calmly straight toward the two boys’ faces.

Under her suffocating gaze, the two boys felt as if they were half a head shorter, and were overwhelmed with a feeling of inferiority.

As they stole a glance around, the account book was nowhere to be seen. There was really no word that can describe the two boys' disappointment.

Shan Wanjing said dryly, "The other day I was not in a very good mood, and my hands slipped and injured Xu Gongzi. Right now just consider me apologizing."

Although her manner was very polite, plus she was apologizing in person, the two boys were able to clearly see that she did not really care about them; she did not even have the courtesy to have them sit down and talk. As if they were only fit to be her underlings who had to stand up deferentially while listening to her bossing people around.

Shan Wanjing coldly sized them up and down several times, before continuing, "Why aren't you speaking?"

Full of anger, Kou Zhong said, "We have nothing to say; if you want to say something, just be our guest and say whatever you want!"

A faint smile escaped from the corner of Shan Wanjing's mouth. Her beautiful eyes penetrated Xu Ziling deeply as she spoke gently, "I can't be considered good to you, but you brought it upon yourselves. Fortunately all these will be over soon; I have arranged a place for you to stay."

"What?!?" Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong exclaimed hoarsely.

"Don't make much fuss about nothing," Shan Wanjing said indifferently, "Currently the number of people in Jianghu who have the ability to protect you is indeed not many; Li Clan is one of them. Based on our relationship with the Li Clan, we only need to open our mouth, they will definitely take care of you."

The two boys called for their mother inwardly; if following her advice they went to the Li guy's ship, would they still have a face to see the Li guy?

Kou Zhong hurriedly said, "Thank you Princess for taking a lot of trouble for us. We are the kind of people who are most afraid of lodging under another person's

roof while watching other people's countenance as we conduct ourselves. If Princess thinks that we are not pleasing to your eyes, we will immediately jump into the lake. In this way we are slipping away to everyone's delight and satisfaction, both parties are happy."

Shan Wanjing's pretty eyes flashed with cold rays as she crossly said, "What are you talking about?"

Xu Ziling was also indignant. "Zhong Shao was so articulate and clear, unexpectedly Princess was not able to hear it clearly?" he asked in astonishment, "We definitely will not live relying on other people's charity; we won't need your so-called benevolence either. We are going back to our room right now to pack, and then will leave immediately. Please!"

Actually, the two boys did not have anything to pack, they just wanted to stall for time. After Madame Dong Ming and the evil woman in front of them left, they would return to look for the account book before leaving.

"Halt!" Shan Wanjing angrily barked.

The two boys jumped in fright; they stared at her hatefully.

Shan Wanjing's silky breasts moved up and down rapidly. The fact was that even she herself did not understand why it was very easy for her to get angry at Xu Ziling; it was so not like her usual calm and cold nature.

After half-a-day of awkward silence, Shan Wanjing calmed down. She heaved a deep sigh and her voice became gentle, "How about this? We'll ask Li Clan people to give you a ride. After you reach a safe place, you may go as you wish. Perhaps you still don't know it, but that incapable ruler has issued a strict order to obtain the 'Secret to Long Life' in your possession at all cost."

For the first time ever there was a genuine concern over their safety in her voice. However, since they already had prejudice against her, naturally the two boys did not feel it; besides, they would not accept it anyway.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "If that's the case, we can't climb onto Li Clan's big ship even more. After all, Li Clan is one of the Emperor's son's hunting dog; how would we know they won't see profit and forget morality, and sell us, the two brothers?"

Toward Kou Zhong, this beautiful Princess obviously had much higher tolerance. She smiled and said, "Don't underestimate other people. When you see Li Shimin, you will see such a real hero that makes other people willing to commit themselves to him cheerfully. Not to worry, I can guarantee in the name of Dong Ming Pai that such thing will never happen."

While she was speaking about Li Shimin, her bright, lively beautiful eyes were constantly looking at Xu Ziling; her eyes were saying that compared to Li Shimin, you, Xu Ziling, are far too inferior.

But Xu Ziling did not have the slightest idea; in his usual natural and unrestrained manner he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Whether he is a real hero or a fake hero, we are accustomed to carefree life, and have no interest in clinging onto the hero Princess thinks so highly of."

Kou Zhong remembered that Madame Dong Ming once told them that they ought to learn through experience in Jianghu; he had a brainwave, "Princess' idea, I am afraid you have not received Madame's approval, have you?"

Swj's countenance turned cold again; brushing her sleeve away she said, "Get lost! By the time I am back, don't let me see your face again. You want to deliver your life, just go to hell!"

The two boys felt as if they had just received the Emperor's pardon; they withdrew from the room in great delight.

Having much experience climbing down the wall, the two boys scaled down the wall without any mishaps toward the study room's window.

The study room light has been extinguished; it was completely quiet. Not daring to hesitate, they craned their neck first to make sure nobody was inside before slipping in through the window; soon they were inside the study room.

Following the technique taught by Ol' Chen, the two of them split up and methodically combed the study room until nothing was overlooked.

After being busy for half a sichen [i.e. an hour], they have scoured every cun of the room, yet they still could not find the account book.

The two boys sat slumping on the floor, so disappointed that they almost cried.

If they could obtain the account book, not only they would do that Li guy a big favor, they would probably be able to implicate Yuwen Huagu and had him, along with his entire family, executed unto the third generation.

But now everything was lost.

The account book was simply not in the study room.

Kou Zhong painfully said, "That woman [derogatory] must have brought that thing to settle the account with that Li guy. It's over. The hardest thing for me is that we must leave immediately, otherwise, that evil woman would toss us out to the water like throwing garbage."

Xu Ziling dejectedly said, "If we want to go, the sooner the better!"

Shang Gong's voice, which was as easy to recognize as if it was the exclusive signboard above his head, rang again in the two boys' eardrums.

How could the two boys not realize that disaster was imminent? They sprang up and were about to jump into the lake through the window when Shang Gong, as nimble as a wild cat, leaped inside from outside the window. The senile old man was completely gone.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's only way out was blocked by him; they could neither advance nor retreat, and were in an extremely difficult situation.

Shang Gong raised his left hand and laughed softly as he said, “Are you looking for this account book? Come and get it if you have the ability!”

The two boys were dumbstruck; they could only stare with mouth agape at the precious account book in his left hand. Naturally they did not dare to make their move to snatch it away.

Shang Gong said nonchalantly, “Madame entrusted this responsibility to me, the old man. Naturally Laofu [old man, referring to self] must not disappoint her. These days Laofu has been watching you. Listening to your conversation, I even gave you a warning, but your thief character is hard to change, making Laofu very disappointed.”

With a bitter laugh Kou Zhong said, “We received a request from a friend ...”

Shang Gong coldly cut him off, “Laofu don’t give your reason a d@mn, I only know that this account book concerns our Dong Ming Pai’s reputation. It’s just that were it not for the two of you making such a big fuss over it, we would not know that such an account book could become the root of great turmoil. When Madame is back, Laofu will ask Madame to destroy it, so that nobody will be able to exploit it as a fighting instrument.”

[1] Meixian, lit. beautiful immortal. At first I thought Shan Mei Xian was her nickname, but from this passage, apparently ‘Meixian’ was her given name, surnamed Shan.

This moment, the two boys’ interest was not so much on the account book but on their own destiny.

Speaking to this point, Shang Gong was still using a low voice, as if he was afraid others might hear him, which gave them hope.

Shang Gong casually tossed the account book onto the desk, while showing the first ever smile they saw since he came in, “Your innate character cannot be considered bad, you have not lost your innocence. Sometimes when I was

listening to you, I could not help laughing.”

‘Beating the snake following the stick’ [see Book 3 Chapter 3] Kou Zhong said in low voice, “Shang Gong, is it possible for you to let us, two brothers, off this time?”

Shang Gong shook his head and said, “Public is public, personal is personal [fyi, the ‘gong’ of Shang Gong also means ‘public’ or ‘common’]. Our Dong Ming Pai’s most serious statutes, in all my life, since I was young, I have never deviate even half a step from it; how can I, at the last segment of my life, falter from it for the sake of you, two little kids? But when Madame returns, I can speak a couple of good words on your behalf. Now kneel down in front of Laofu.”

The two boys simultaneously thought about Dong Ming Princess; they both thought that warriors can be killed but never humiliated, so their hands instantly moved toward the hilt of their sabers.

Shang Gong shook his head and sighed, “If it were ten years in the future, Laofu really cannot guarantee whether this weary old body would be able to withstand your two boys’ joint attack, but right now your weight simply falls too short. Come!”

The two boys exchanged glances; they knew that they had reached a situation where there was no more leeway. So they drew their sabers and attacked.

Shang Gong’s face revealed a shocked look; but still calm and unhurried he raised both sleeves to generate two streams of powerful qi, meeting the two lightning fast saber hacking down on him.

Based on his status, naturally his victory had to be neat and tidy. If he had to alert the others before they could subdue these two boys, his face would suffer a huge setback.

‘Bang! Bang!’ with two muffled explosions Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt the palm of their hands exploded, their sabers were flung away, while their entire body was jolted, sending them tumbling backwards, and it felt like their internal organs were about to burst.

While the two boys were groaning inwardly for their terrible situation, Shang Gong suddenly let out a painful grunt and staggered sideways.

The two boys were at a loss; suddenly a human figure clad in black leaped in through the window and while he was still in the air, the shadow attacked Shang Gong left and right with a pair of daggers about a chi long in each hand, each move was never far away from Shang Gong's vital points; extremely accurate, vicious and ruthless.

In the blink of an eye Shang Gong, who was already injured by the sneak attack, has already exchanged more than ten moves against the enemy.

Meanwhile the two boys recovered from their panic and dropped themselves down on the floor to get away from the scuffle. They saw that in the spacious study room, the man in black moved like a ghost, they only saw his shadow like wisps of smoke floating above and all around Shang Gong, unfolding astonishing attacks like the tidal waves of Yangtze River or Yellow River toward Shang Gong, who, very soon, was falling into disadvantageous position, without giving Shang Gong the least bit of opportunity to catch his breath.

By this time the two boys' vision was much better than before, they could tell that this man's skill was not inferior in any respect to Du Fuwei's.

While they were contemplating whether they should call for reinforcement, Shang Gong let out an earth-shattering roar as he forcibly extricated himself from the enemy's sword net. 'Bang!' he crashed onto the cabin wall and into the adjacent room.

Obviously that man was not interested in Shang Gong. Lightning fast he flew toward the desk, grabbed the account book, and without even casting a glance toward the two boys he leaped out of the window.

This moment sound of footsteps and people shouting and yelling were getting closer. The two boys yelled and sprang up, and then with all their strength they jumped out the window into the lake below.

‘Splosh!’ the two boys dove deep into the icy-cold water. They were trying desperately to distance themselves from Dong Ming flagship, when suddenly they felt something was not right, and their backs were grabbed from behind, while at the same time a stream of true qi penetrated their back, consecutively sealing a dozen or so major acupoints on their bodies.

The man apparently thought that he has immobilized them; he grabbed their arms instead, and dragged them along under water at an astonishing speed. It was only after covering more than ten zhang distance that they surfaced.

Shouts were still occasionally heard from the Dong Ming flagship, which was thrown into total chaos. The man let out a cold laugh, and then grabbing the two boys’ collar, he moved his two legs to swim really fast like a fish.

Meanwhile the fantastic true qi inside the two boys’ body spontaneously surged on and opened the sealed acupoints. While they were contemplating whether they should make their move, the man cursed under his breath, “Reckless bunch!”

The two boys opened their eyes a little to peek, and saw a dozen or so fast boats were speeding up like artillery shells in their direction. When the man dragged the two boys back into the water, they knew their chance has come. Kou Zhong lightly nudged Xu Ziling, and then together they exerted everything they had into their elbows, striking the man’s flank and his belly, respectively.

The man doubled up in pain, automatically his grabs on the two boys loosened, while he spurted a mouthful of fresh blood.

Kou Zhong already knew that the man had the account book wrapped in a waterproof oil cloth bundle and tied it on his waist; he seized this opportunity to reach out and snatch the bundle away.

Xu Ziling sent a follow-up punch toward the man’s face, but the man was indeed highly skilled; unexpectedly he was able to endure the pain and evaded the punch.

The two boys did not dare to pursue; desperately they dove down to the

bottom of the lake first before swimming away with all their strength toward the isolated island.

This was the brilliance of their plan; evading the martial art expert's pursuit was by no means, not an easy task, but no matter how powerful the expert was, he would not dare to return to where Li Clan and Dong Ming Sect people were. The most ingenious thing was that Dong Ming Sect people would search the nearby body of water, but they would never suspect that the two boys would return to the island instead.

This moment the two boys looked exactly like fish in the water, in no time at all they already reached the bottom of Li Shimin's big ship.

Floating up to the surface, they saw Dong Ming flagship was brightly lit, but Li Shimin's ship was in total blackout, quiet, with no visible movement. Kou Zhong whispered, "I hope Li guy's people don't mistake us for thieves."

"Go up!" Xu Ziling said, "I was so shaken by that old fellow that I feel like my tender bones are falling apart!"

After suffering untold hardships, finally the mission was accomplished. Now they could take Li guy's money with clear conscience. The excitement in their heart was certainly hard to describe.

Moreover, they bravely snatched this account book away from that mysterious martial art expert, hence it lessened the guilty feeling of being little thief, and considerably cleared their conscience.

Once again they put their climbing-wall experience to work. When they passed Li Shimin's sister's cabin, recalling that gentle and pleasant-to-the-ear voice, Kou Zhong could not refrain himself from looking in.

Completely caught off-guard, a dagger suddenly shot out, as fast as lightning, toward his throat. Kou Zhong was so scared that he nearly fell down. Not daring to move a finger, he froze on the spot, while still hanging outside the window.

A half-delighted, half-angry, extremely beautiful pair of eyes appeared about a chi away from Kou Zhong's nose, coldly scrutinizing him.

By this time Xu Ziling already climbed onto his side and gave him a little push, indicating that he should not stop here; Xu Ziling was completely oblivious that Kou Zhong might lose his life at any time.

This lovely young woman, whose beauty was comparable to Dong Ming Princess, said in low voice, "Who are you?"

With strained breathing, Kou Zhong replied, "I am Kou Zhong, Li ..."

The beauty withdrew her dagger and cried out softly, "Why haven't you come in? If somebody saw you, we will be in big trouble."

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted, he called Xu Ziling and still dripping wet, together they crawled into the girl's room.

The first thing Kou Zhong did was taking out the bundle and opened the oilcloth. The account book was staring back at them.

The two boys cheered in chorus.

The beauty clearly knew about their deal with Li Shimin. Picking up the account book, she flipped the pages for a moment, and then delightedly said, "This is it. The two of you wait here for a moment, let me see if Er Ge has returned or not."

After smiling sweetly, she went out the door.

The two boys went over to the rear cabin wall and sat down on the floor, feeling once again like decent human beings.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "This girl is so beautiful. If I had known, I would have asked for her and not for money."

Xu Ziling laughed and said, "This time I'll let you have her; next time we encounter this kind of sweet girl, it will be my turn."

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, "Yours, mine, have you thought about what kind of things are we? She is a thousand-catty gold [i.e. precious daughter], born into respected family, a large and influential clan; when will we have our turn?"

Xu Ziling dispiritedly said, "Zhong Shao, since when did you become so modest? Didn't you often say that we will be Wulin masters in the future? You also said that we will be bestowed the title marquis and promoted to be generals? Why so discouraged all of a sudden?"

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "We can say what we want, but compared to that unlucky martial art master just now, our martial art skill is far too inferior. He was caught completely off guard when we attacked, yet he merely threw up a bird's mouthful of blood and that's it. And then that old fellow surnamed Shang also said that before ten years, eight years, our martial art skill's not worth showing. That's right, we must remember to ask that Li guy for two more sabers; without sabers, we can't even fight."

"Not at all," Xu Ziling said, "Otherwise, we can forget learning and understanding punching and kicking skill. No saber, just use our hands. We can still execute the Bloody Battle Ten-style taught by Li Dage."

After waiting painfully for the time needed to burn an incense stick, Li Shimin's beautiful sister returned. It was only then did the two boys notice that she was wearing beautiful pastel-colored dress, her figure sweet, fair and graceful, her manner dignified and elegant, making other people unable to criticize.

Seeing the two boys were sitting on the floor like beggars, the beauty was greatly displeased, "Why are you sitting on the floor? Still won't stand up?"

Feeling extremely foolish, the two boys stood up.

The door opened, Li Shimin rushed in. Ignoring their drenched bodies, he hugged them tightly. "Success!" his voice trembled with emotion, "Just now Madame Dong Ming personally wrote a letter, telling me to immediately go to

Taiyuan and hand it over to Die. If our Li family obtain the world [tian xia] in the future, we certainly won't treat two gentlemen meagerly."

Book 4 Chapter 1 – Aspiration Higher Than The Sky

When Xu Ziling woke up, the sky was barely brightened; he saw for the first time ever Kou Zhong was already out of bed before he did. He was standing by the cabin window, staring blankly at the darkness outside.

They were in a cabin, which the Li guy arranged for them. In the next room over was precisely the Li Clan's beauty Li Xiuning, the Li guy's captivating younger sister.

Xu Ziling walked over to where Kou Zhong was standing. Kou Zhong sighed and said, "Xiao Ling! I found a sweetheart!"

'What?' Xu Ziling's voice broke.

"Don't you think Li guy's little sister is very beautiful?" Kou Zhong whispered, "She is easy-mannered and gentle, those eyes are pretty and charming, her breasts are exquisite floating protrusions, her legs, ay! They could lead men to their death. Her cheeks rosy, I am sure those are the cutest cheeks on earth. Her skin soft and smooth like satin brocade, white and pink. Heavens! If I can embrace her naked body every night to bed, I won't think of anything else; because what on earth could be more satisfying than that? When she speaks, her voice and her facial expression make me drunk, and when she occasionally smiles sweetly, and casting your Niang a sidelong glance, Xiao Ling! I am going to die of love."

Xu Ziling grabbed his shoulder and laughed until he was out of breath. "Do you call that 'love'?" he asked, "You, this muddled-egg, are just lusting over her."

And then he wondered aloud, “Didn’t you say that the more women we have the better? Why is it this time only she one person is enough?”

Kou Zhong said in distress, “Can you not dig up my old scores? When I said those things, I did not even have half a girlfriend, hence I said all those heroic things to console myself. But now I have her, naturally I have to concentrate only on one aspiration. Do you understand?”

Xu Ziling changed into wrapping his arm around Kou Zhong’s broad shoulders and said in amazement, “Looks like you are serious.”

“Of course I am serious,” Kou Zhong indignantly said, “Right now Li guy is rushing to Taiyuan to force his old man to revolt. Based on Li Clan’s prestige, with Taiyuan as their base of operation, plus with elite soldiers and ample provisions, there is a good chance that he will become the emperor. Since we are going to join a militia anyway, why not rely on that Li guy? Since we have rendered great merit to him, the official position that Li guy is going to bestow us must not be too low.”

Xu Ziling stared blankly for half a day, and then he said in low voice, “Is your heart not dead toward his mother’s militia? It would be better for us to concentrate on salt-trafficking business and make money while the world is in chaos. If we have money we can help the people; wouldn’t it be better than fighting for life and death for other people?”

Kou Zhong smiled apologetically and said, “Times have changed too. Hey! Just look at that Li guy’s righteous manners; how can you compare him to Du Fuwei, Li Mi, those half man half ghost fellows?”

With a bitter laugh Xu Ziling said, “Let’s not talk about this right now. At the end of the day, you only want to get close to Li Xiuning. Don’t blame me for pouring iced water on your keen interest. Although on the surface this noble family’s girl treats us politely, I always feel that she kind of turn us down from a thousand li away. A girl who was born from this kind of respected family like her will always look down on little marketplace ruffians like the two of us.”

This time Kou Zhong wrapped his arm around Xu Ziling’s shoulders and said

with a giggle, “The first time people meet, of course they are strangers to each other; are you saying that she needs to keep you within a chi of her? There is nothing impossible in this world. To pursue a girl we only need a bit of creativity and smoothness. Later, when that Li guy invites us, two very useful fellows, to join his campaign, remember to leave everything to me.”

Xu Ziling frowned and asked, “So who’s going to save Susu Jiejie?”

Evidently Kou Zhong has not thought about this point; he was stunned speechless.

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “You go pursue Miss Xiuning whom you yearn for even in your dreams! Let me take care of Susu Jiejie. But I definitely don’t want to join anybody’s campaign. Only I need to take that account book back, so that I can avenge Niang.”

While Kou Zhong was as dumb as a wooden chicken, there was a knock on their door.

The two boys followed a maid toward the hall on the upper deck; Li Shimin had arranged a banquet to entertain them. Accompanying them were a handsome young man and a forty-something scholar, tall, thin, natural and unrestrained.

Li Shimin stood up to welcome them, “Kou Xiong, Xu Xiong, please sit down. We are all family.”

The two men also stood up politely and cupped their fists, making the two boys quite flattered.

Li Shimin introduced the middle-aged scholar first, “This is Mr. Pei Ji, his skill ‘wang xing shan’ [forgetting-shape fan] can exhaust the world’s heroes. He is the deputy supervisor of Jinyang Palace, and my father’s chess [qi] mate.”

Pei Ji looked at the two boys indifferently, and said modestly, “Nephew Shimin praises me too much; it’s just a lame-hand duck-feet skill, how can it be something worth considering? Not to mention exhausting the world’s heroes.”

And then he turned toward the handsome young man and said with a laugh, "Speaking about martial art skill, we must move aside for nephew Chai Shao's brilliance and prestige."

The one called Chai Shao promptly declined modestly.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling noticed Chai Shao's splendid sword and beautiful clothes, his imposing manner and elegance, which was only slightly inferior to Li Shimin's bold poise and some kind of hard-to-describe great general's air. But since they already had favorable impression toward him, the two boys hurriedly expressed some courteous words.

However, all along Chai Shao carried a bit of haughtiness toward the two boys, unlike the Li guy who treated them warmly.

Pei Ji was treating them only as younger generation juniors who happened to render a great merit. After they sat down, he only chatted with Li and Chai, two people, and no longer paid any attention to the two boys.

The two boys were accustomed to be looked down like that, so they did not care much, but focusing their attention to dealing with the delicacies and gourmet foods on the table.

In Li Shimin's mind, naturally Pei Ji and Chai Shao were more important than Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, but he did not neglect hospitality; he personally picked two pieces of deep-fried dough cake and gave it to the two boys, while saying with a laugh, "This is called Steamed Hu Cake [hu is generic term for non-Han people], it has lamb and scallion stuffing, salted fermented beans sauce and sesame seed, simmered in salt; very delicious."

The two boys had never tasted any Hu cake, which was popular in the north; they ate with relish.

This moment Chai Shao said, "This time Uncle has no choice but to raise arms. And if he does, he will have to take Guanzhong first. My only concern is the two elite troops of Qu Tutong at Puguan and Song Laosheng's guarding Huoyi. It

seems that Uncle is not without apprehension.”

Pei Ji said, “Qu Tutong and Song Laosheng are indeed worrisome, but the one I am worried about is Tujue people; their power is stronger day by day. On the east Khitan, Shiwei, on the west Tuyuhun, Gaochang, and other countries are submitting themselves to them. Moreover, those who raise army in the north like Liu Wuzhou, Guo Zihe, Liang Shidou and the others, none does not rely on the Tujue for their existence. When we march toward Guanzhong, what we fear the most is sustaining the Tujue, Liu Wuzhou and the others mounting a sneak attack from behind.”

Li Shimin was already prepared a plan, “That is not a problem,” he said, “If we don’t have enough power, we can use strategy. The one thing I am most worried right now is that Die will still be indecisive; I am afraid we will just sit and waste a good opportunity.”

Pei Ji patted his chest to vow, “Leave this matter to me, Pei Ji. As long as Wenjing and I persuade him a little more, and seeing the critical situation in front of our eyes, how can your Die have any other choice?”

Li Shimin nodded his head delightedly. Turning toward Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling he said, “This time it is all due to the two gentlemen. Were it not for the account book got stolen, I am afraid it will still be difficult to create this kind of situation. The most wonderful thing is that that incapable ruler happens to go to Jiangdu to deal with Du Fuwei. This is a one in a million chance.”

The two boys looked at each other; it was only then did they know that the emperor guy finally visited their native place of Jiangdu, Yangzhou.

Right this moment there was the tinkling of girdle ornaments; without turning their heads, the two boys already captured Li Xiuning’s beautiful image in their minds, momentarily they could only stare blankly.

She was wearing a Hu hat [see my note above on ‘hu’] that was as round as a bowl, with silkscreen hanging down all around its edge, the top of the hat was garnished with pearl and green jade. It was a unique style; not only it was gorgeous, it was also brimming with faintly discernible mysterious beauty.

The clothes she wore was totally different from the Central Plains and the southern style with its broad overlap and big sleeves, hers had big turndown collar and narrow sleeves, which was similar to the clothes those Hu women, which they saw at Pengcheng, wore; only the material was finer.

This kind of clothes not only highlighted women's exquisite curves, it was also much more convenient in term of mobility.

The first to stand up was Chai Shao. This guy's eyes lit up; with fiery enthusiasm he cheerfully said, "Finally Ning Mei is here, Yuxiong [me, older brother] has been waiting till my heart nearly burned into coal."

It was as if Li Xiuning did not see other people; she smiled sweetly at Chai Shao, and moved her tender body to Chai Shao's side, allowing him to lightly support her fragrant shoulder and help her to sit. Only then did she greet her older brother and Pei Ji. Lastly she acknowledged Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling.

Kou Zhong felt like he had just struck by lightning, as he watched the intimacy between Chai Shao and Li Xiuning in shock; his face turned ash grey.

Although Xu Ziling felt sorry for him, there was nothing he could do.

Li Shimin noticed Kou Zhong's abnormal expression, he leaned over and whispered, "Kou Xiong, are you not feeling well?"

Li Xiuning laughed tenderly and said, "Must be from last night when he was soaked in the lake so now he catches cold." And then she turned to Chai Shao to explain, "When Xiuning saw them last night, I thought it was a couple of little water demons crawling up from the lake to harm people."

Seeing her casting amorous glances at Chai Shao while revealing loving smile at the corner of her mouth, and then looking at her jade countenance inside the silkscreen was full of tender feelings as she looked at Chai Shao, Xu Ziling's heart, which was saddened on Kou Zhong's behalf, sank even lower.

Suddenly he came to realization that Li Xiuning only regarded them as lowly errand boys who worked for her second brother; so evidently her view of the two boys was identical to that of Pei and Chai, two people.

Kou Zhong hung down his head and said in a hoarse voice, "I am fine. It's just that other than a water demon, I am also a hungry ghost, so I ate too much and now I am too full."

Li Xiuning was exceptionally intelligent, hearing the displeasure in his voice, she apologized, "I was just making an analogy, Kou Xiong please don't take offense."

By saying that, now everybody else thought that Kou Zhong was narrow-minded. Pei Ji and Chai Shao immediately showed disdain on their faces.

Li Shimin, on the other hand, was extremely grateful to Kou and Xu, two boys, and also because he was deeply impressed by these two boys' vast intelligence and wisdom, to be able to think of such a divine-inspired scheme to steal the account book. In order to diffuse the tensed atmosphere, he smiled and said, "Kou Xiong is joking! Hey! The one went to Dong Ming flagship and seized the account book, what kind of divine being is he actually?"

Chai Shao wanted to show off in front of a beautiful [orig. jade] person, he let out a cold snort and said, "Must not be a formidable person; otherwise how could Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong have any chance to take advantage of him?"

As soon as he said that, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's countenance turned unnatural, because he was saying that the two boys could not be considered anything.

Li Xiuning's thought process was definitely a lot more thorough than Chai Shao's; her jet-black painted eyebrows were knitted as she said, "That person has enough guts to single-handedly charge into Dong Ming flagship, which has martial art experts as numerous as the cloud, to steal something; no matter how you say it, he must have a bit of weight."

Chai Shao smiled and said, "Didn't he take advantage of when Madame Dong Ming and Princess left the ship to come to our ship before he dared to make his

move?”

Li Xiuning stole a glance toward Li Shimin first before giving him an ambiguous answer, “If Wanjing Jie was not eager to see Er Ge, and remained on the ship, that thief’s sneak attack would not have been successful, and Shang Gong would not have been injured!”

A look of regret flitted across Li Shimin’s eyes, “Xiuning must not forget that I am married,” he rebuked her, “But on the other hand, were it not for Shang Gong is injured by that man, we could forget about getting this crucial letter from Madame.”

Pei Ji said in deep voice, “Shao Xianzhi [virtuous nephew] must not belittle this man, just the fact that he was able to beat Shang Gong without he was able to resist, it is clear that although the account book was snatched away by two Xiao Xiongdi, it may be assumed that he was just overly underestimating them!”

Li Shimin nodded and said, “This man must be from Yuwen Clan. Speaking about water skill, within the Yuwen Clan, Yuwen Chengdu ranks the first. But I think it wasn’t he who personally came, otherwise it would be difficult for Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong to unseal their acupoints.”

Realizing that these people, including Li Shimin, did not think too highly of their skill, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling was terribly upset.

This moment Kou Zhong signaled Xu Ziling with his eyes. Xu Ziling’s mind was interlinked with Kou Zhong’s; he understood his intention, hence he nodded slightly and spoke seriously, “We, brothers, wish that we could get the account book back so that we could do something very important.”

Li Shimin and the others were greatly shocked.

Relying on his seniority, Pei Ji imposed, “This account book records every aspect of Dong Ming Pai’s arms transaction; it is more appropriate to have it stay in our hands.”

Li Xiuning had a rather favorable impression toward the two boys, she urged, "If other people knew that the account book is in your hands, Dong Ming Pai will never let you off."

Chai Shao showed an impatient look on his face.

Xu Ziling remained calm, he boldly said, "This is our, two brothers' problem. Li Xiong, what do you think?"

Li Shimin knitted his brows and said, "As soon as we met, I knew that we are kindred spirits; if two gentlemen do not have any place you have to go, why not cooperate with me, Li Shimin, to fight for a common cause? When our Li family succeed in the future, two gentlemen will also enjoy riches and honor."

Kou Zhong resolutely said, "Li Xiong's good intention is highly appreciated. Due to we have another important matter we need to attend to, I wish for Li Xiong to return the account book to us, and then you send us off at any nearby shore."

Chai Shao showed his displeasure, "How can this ..." But Li Shimin raised his hand to stop him from continuing.

After looking at the two boys for quite a while, he sighed and said, "If I say no, that means I don't have enough friendship and yiqi. Let's do it according to what two gentlemen said. But please don't forget that when you change your mind in the future, you may come to look for me, Li Shimin."

Jugong Pond extended before the two boys' eyes as far as they could see. The fog covering the lake changed according to where the wind blew.

Kou Zhong watched as the huge Li Clan ship disappearing into the fog, his eyes looked vast and obscure, and he was unusually quiet.

Xu Ziling accompanied him standing on the west bank of the big lake; momentarily he was also at a loss of what to say.

It was after a long time that he sounded Kou Zhong out, "Zhong Shao, are you

alright?”

Kou Zhong dryly replied, “How can I not be alright?”

Hearing the tone of his voice, Xu Ziling knew that he had not let it go yet. Without any better option, he consoled him, “Why would a real man worry about not having a wife? Let alone Zhong Shao, this time you did not lose the battle, it’s just that Chai guy enjoys the benefit of the ‘quick-footed who climb up first’!”

A complex expression flitted across Kou Zhong’s tiger eyes; it was quite a while later that he finally said in deep voice, “I would rather she hates me!”

“What?” Xu Ziling blurted out.

Kou Zhong turned around like a whirlwind, made a fist and cried out, “I want her to hate me just like Dong Ming Princess hates you. At the very least I would still have a place in her heart. But now when she saw me leaving, she did not show the slightest bit of sign that she cared. Practically we are just two little minions who rush about, exerting ourselves for her Li Clan; we are not even qualified to make her unhappy.”

Noticing how when he spoke, his eyes turned red, he gnashed his teeth in anger, Xu Ziling could not help thinking about Dong Ming Princess Shan Wanjing. He said dejectedly, “How much better do you think I am from you? Didn’t you hear that crafty and unruly Princess only has eyes for people with dignity and status like that Li guy?”

Kou Zhong stared blankly for half a day. And then he turned around and saw that the autumn mist has gradually dissipated. Suddenly he laughed.

Xu Ziling was baffled. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

Kou Zhong roared in laughter; he laughed so hard that he had to squat while holding his belly with both hands. Gasping for breath, he said, “I just realized something; that’s why I laughed so hard.”

Xu Ziling followed his example; he also squatted down and happily asked, “Quick, tell me.”

Kou Zhong looked up and stared at Xu Ziling for quite a while before saying, “Speaking about talent and appearance, I don’t believe that we are much worse than Li guy or perhaps that Chai guy. So what made them treat us as nobody? Because we lack accomplishment. It doesn’t matter whether we are in Jianghu or within a clan or society, those without accomplishment will most likely be ignored.”

Xu Ziling knitted his brows and said, “But if we strive for fame, profit, and position only for other people, won’t that be the same as letting others lead us by the nose?”

Kou Zhong sneered and said, “At the end of the day, we are doing it for ourselves. To be respected deeply by others is just the natural consequences. A real man living his life in this world, if he cannot accomplish an outstanding work, but let his precious life slips away in vain, won’t that be a pity?”

Xu Ziling sneered, “What crafty [orig. ghostly] idea do you have in mind this time?” he asked, “You don’t want to do salt business anymore?”

Kou Zhong shook his head. “I want to be the Emperor!” he said.

“What?” Xu Ziling was shocked.

Kou Zhong suddenly stood up, clenched his fist and shout loudly, “I, Kou Zhong, want to fight for the world [tian xia], to establish a glorious deed that will last for ten thousand generations.”

Xu Ziling sprang up and reached out to feel his forehead.

Kou Zhong angrily brushed his hand away and grabbed Xu Ziling’s shoulders instead. With eyes shining brightly he said, “Aspiration must be far-reaching. If we cannot accomplish it, even a little deficiency still carries a lot a weight. Today

is not the same as the past, speaking about ability and wisdom, we are not inferior to anybody; speaking about martial art skill, what we lack is only experience and maturity. Right now we go to Xingyang first to find Susu Jie; if we can find Li Dage, that will be even better. One world, two brothers. Will you help me or not?”

Xu Ziling’s scalp felt numb. But under the circumstances, how could he refuse? Without any better option, he nodded his approval.

Kou Zhong cheered, turned around and made a somersault, and landed on a big rock more than a zhang away. He laughed aloud and said, “Come! Let us compete in leg power first, and then we must practice our punching and kicking skill. In any case, we do not have even half a knife to cut meat; without any other choice, we must put up with it a bit.”

Xu Ziling’s aspiration started to rise; he and Kou Zhong ran chasing one another.

Book 4 Chapter 2 – Enlightenment By The Well

More than ten li from where Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling disembarked, in the second story of a restaurant at the downtown area of Dongping County, the two boys ordered food and drink, and went eating and drinking as much as they liked.

On parting, Li Shimin presented them a substantial amount of money. Naturally Kou Zhong was not shy to accept it; therefore, they instantly became high-spirited and set to work to spend it.

Xu Ziling pressed his hand down on the wine pot and persuaded Kou Zhong, “Enough drinking, you are about to pass out.”

Kou Zhong brushed his hand away and poured his own drink, “Just let me be drunk this his mother’s time! I guarantee I won’t drink anymore after this.”

Xu Ziling was displeased, “Didn’t you say you have come to realization? And now you want to drown your sorrow in wine; what kind of hero is that?”

Kou Zhong squinted and cast a sidelong glance to Xu Ziling; brushing his hand aside, he squeaked and said, “This is called wine of celebration! Celebrating my, Zhong Shao’s first time learning to love and fell in love with a big-headed Buddha. Ha! I am going to get drunk for her granny’s sake only once, in the future I will make her regret that she did not marry me. What kind of ‘thing’ that Chai guy anyway to have the cheek to look down on me? Come! Bottoms up!”

Xu Ziling was at a loss. Seeing that there were only a handful of people in the restaurant and they were all looking at them, he had no choice but to clink his cup to Kou Zhong's, but he stayed silent.

Kou Zhong was already drunk; he crouched on the table and mumbled, "Alright, now it's enough. Let us now go to the pleasure house next door, we'll pick a girl who is a hundred times, a thousand times prettier than she; let's see if I cannot live without her."

Xu Ziling seized the opportunity to settle the bill, and forcefully pulled him up and helped him down the stairs, while going along with him, "Go! We'll visit a low-grade brothel."

Half of Kou Zhong immediately perked up; he said, "Don't lie to me, one world two brothers, you must take me to the pleasure house, and must pick the cutest girl for me."

When the two boys stepped out onto the street, it was early evening when the lanterns were first lit; the main street ought to be bustling with activities, yet it was as quiet as the ghost area. Under the autumn breeze, only one or two people were outside, walking briskly; it was indeed a desolate scene.

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "Looks like you are still clear-headed!"

Kou Zhong's countenance changed, "Turns out you do not have any intention to take me to the pleasure house; can you still be considered my brother?"

Xu Ziling forced himself to respond, "Did I promise you that?"

Kou Zhong suddenly flung Xu Ziling's arm away; staggering to the sidewalk he squatted and stooped down, 'wah!' he vomited the content of his stomach.

Xu Ziling rushed forward, squatted alongside him, grabbed his shoulder, and with his other hand he rubbed Kou Zhong's back. His heart was aching that he felt like crying.

He had never seen Kou Zhong this unhappy.

After vomiting all the yucky, gooey yellowish sour liquid from his stomach, Kou Zhong hung his head and while gasping for breath he said, "Xiao Ling! I am so miserable!"

Xu Ziling sighed and said, "Your love life has only just begun, yet you are so miserable like this. If after Li Xiuning and you pledge undying love to each other, and then she changes her affection, shifts her love; won't you kill yourself then?"

Kou Zhong shook his head, "You don't understand," he said, "Last night when you and Li guy were studying the account book, she and I had a very congenial conversation; she was showing a lot of concerns over me." And then he became distressed, "But now that I think about it, she was just probing our background on Li guy's behalf. From the beginning to the very end, she had never had me, Kou Zhong, in her heart."

Xu Ziling dejectedly said, "You should have known that those people from upper class, influential family would never show respect for us, lowly, nameless errand boys! Didn't you bring trouble on yourself this time?"

Clearly Kou Zhong was a lot more sober now, his tiger eyes flickered as he spoke in deep voice, "Good brother, don't worry! After I recover, I won't be that easy to fall in love with any women."

Xu Ziling probed him further, "You still want to go to a brothel?"

Kou Zhong shook his head sadly. Letting Xu Ziling helped him up, he said, "Let's find an inn to spend the night. Tomorrow morning we will immediately go to Xingyang. After finding Susu Jie, we'll ... ha!"

Xu Ziling was helping him walking along the street. "What's so funny?" he asked in bewilderment.

Kou Zhong held on to his shoulders. The more he thought, the more he was amused. "All in all, Laotianye did not treat us too shabbily. At the very least we

have had a glimpse into superior martial art realm, we even completed the first level Niang was talking about. Our money purse has enough silver, and at least we know that 'Duke Yang Treasure' is somewhere near Yuema Bridge in the Capital. Moreover, we obtained the account book that will really make Yuwen Huagu to transform his bones [reminder: 'huagu' means transforming bones]; yet I am still weeping endlessly for a woman. I really did not make any progress."

Xu Ziling was delighted. "Now that is my good brother," he said, "But do you still want to be the emperor?"

Kou Zhong was silent for half a day. Finally he said seriously, "We are starting to think sensibly, hence we'll have to look at other people's countenance to conduct ourselves, this way we will enjoy our lives. Whether I still want to be the emperor, I dare not say, but in short, I do not want to accept our inferior status. What do other people have that we don't have?"

Xu Ziling agreed, "We are not inferior to anybody," he said.

Kou Zhong chuckled, "So let's do some great undertaking, so that Niang's spirit in heaven will be gratified. In the future, no one will dare to consider us as 'not a thing'."

Hearing this, Xu Ziling's heroic spirit soared. He broke into singing, a song that was popular at that time, "I am an honorable young master [gongzi], in all my life I always love talent."

Kou Zhong continued the next line, "When thinking about dedicating myself to the service of my country, I pull out my sword and raise a heroic cry."

The two boys marched bravely forward following the rhythm, while singing in chorus, "Gallop fast westward to Dingling Pass, going up north to Chanyu Plateau. Climbing the mountain looking ahead for a thousand li, recalling the past, the heart is happy and carefree. Who has not forgotten the disaster will be erased into dust."

The singing echoed along the deserted street. At last Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's life of hiding to the east and escaping to the west was over, they were now free

to be themselves and do the matters that they liked.

The two boys came across a well; they sat down by the well's fence.

Kou Zhong craned his neck to look into the well; seeing the water at the bottom of the well reflecting the bright moon hanging high up in the sky, he laughed and said, "Now this is called the universe [qiankun] inside the well. It is deeper and more unmeasurable than Ol' Die's 'xiu li qiankun' [universe inside the sleeve]."

Following his lead, Xu Ziling also looked into the well. He laughed bitterly and said, "I don't know what happened in this Dongping County; all inns are fully booked, but the streets are clear and empty. Hey!"

Kou Zhong was puzzled, "You are looking at the bright moon inside the well; why make so much fuss about nothing?"

Xu Ziling appeared to be deep in thought, his tiger eyes lit up, "I seemed to have just grabbed an important point, but it's so hard to explain."

Kou Zhong stared blankly for half a day, and then he looked into the reflection inside the well again. As it turns out, a cloud was passing by, so that the moon appeared to be suddenly hidden. Suddenly he also felt something indescribable at the bottom of his heart.

Xu Ziling spoke as if he was in a dream, "Didn't Niang say that her Shifu often said that everyone has sufficient resources within himself? This well is self-sufficient. The water inside the well is just like the treasure-trove within human body; it can be used and can be changed into anything. Like this moment for example, it creates the bright moon in the well. Are you saying that is not the real moon? The fact is, real or fake, it's hard to distinguish. Whatever you think it is, it will appear exactly like that."

Kou Zhong's pair of big eyes brightened; he slapped the well's fence and said, "Well said! Watch this!" He randomly picked a pebble and tossed it into the well.

‘Splash!’ The bright moon turned into rippling, wavy lights, and it was quite a while later that the water returned to its previous state.

“I understand now!” Xu Ziling shouted gleefully, “This is indeed some kind of formidable mental cultivation. When I was facing the enemy in the past, at the beginning I could still be calm, just like the clear water inside the well reflecting everything in the surrounding area. But once the fighting started, I was fuming with rage and everything was immediately forgotten.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “You have not been thorough enough. Just like when we saw Ol’ Die, we immediately turned into a mouse seeing a cat. Same thing happened last time we were facing Shang Gong. If we could overcome our panic and maintain the same calmness we can usually achieve during practice, we could become like the clear water in the well, able to reflect everything in the surrounding area. This is completely different from our condition before.”

Xu Ziling leaned over and pressed his cheek against the ice-cold edge of the well; he sighed and said, “I am awfully happy! If I can excel in this kind of no-victory no-defeat, no-demand no-desire, and forever-will-not-be-tempted realm just like the bright moon in the well, I would be willing to have my life shortened by ten years.”

Kou Zhong wanted to say something, but sound of footsteps roused the two boys up. Turning their heads toward the direction of the footsteps they saw two men wearing swords on their waists were coming toward the well. One of them, a man wearing grey clothes, shouted, “Kids, don’t block the well, Laozi wants to drink some water.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Let the kids serve Daye [big master]!”

The two boys worked hands and feet to lower the bucket and get the clear water up. Without any trace of politeness the two big men received the bucket and drank.

The other man said, “Kids are well-behaved. It’s late, what are you doing here?”

Xu Ziling replied, “We have nothing to do, so we are just chatting idly here. May I ask where are two Dashu [big uncles] going?”

The man in grey stared coldly at him, and then said with a cold laugh, “So what if I tell you? Do you have enough qualifications to go?” Finished speaking he and his companion simply left.

The two boys looked at each other; they had no idea what he was talking about [orig. 丈八金剛 (zhang ba jin gang) - ‘unable to figure out the whole story and its contents’], and were completely at a loss.

Kou Zhong said, “Since we don’t have anything to do, why not tail them and see why they are so pretentious? Finding a place to spend the night will also be good.”

Xu Ziling readily agreed.

The two boys’ childish character was aroused; unleashing their qinggong, they flew to the eaves and jumped over the walls just like walking on level ground. They were indeed able to do what their heart wished.

Suddenly they entered a place between the heaven and the earth, where previously they could only dream of, a place where although there was only a fine line separating it from ordinary people’s world, yet it was vastly different; it was the pinnacle of qinggong, which could only be classified as a place where only martial art experts with ultimate skill could ever achieved. This has filled them with mysterious and marvelous feeling.

Their heart and mind have become like the clear water in the well; nothing to think, no obstruction, but objectively reflecting the great mysteries of the universe.

When they stuck out their heads from behind the eaves of a house, the two men had just turned from the alley into the main street ahead.

They saw a huge residential building situated at the southern city wall where

there was an endless stream of horses and carriages outside of its door; it was very lively. Inside and outside the gate the lanterns were fully lit, people coming and going, sound of people talking and laughing could be heard everywhere.

Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "Turns out everybody is coming here. There must be a birthday or wedding, a happy occasion. What do you say we also join the festivities?"

Xu Ziling said, "No wonder those two muddled-eggs laughed at us for not having enough qualifications to come. Just look at the flair, the one having this happy occasion must not be a nobody. Without invitation, how are we going to mingle in?"

Kou Zhong seemed to have been completely recovered from the blow caused by Li Xiuning earlier; brimming with excitement, he said, "If the front gate is impenetrable, we will go through his mother's back door. Right now our clothes are brand-spanking new; as long as we are in, nobody will suspect that we are not genuine articles!"

Without waiting for Xu Ziling's response, Kou Zhong jumped down onto the alley and turned into the main street. Xu Ziling had no choice but to run after him.

Side-by-side the two boys walked toward the big building at the corner of the street. It was only then did they discover that from their angle of view just now they could not see the entire situation of the front gate. It was actually jam-packed with crowd of people who were unable to get it; at least the number would be close to several hundreds.

A group of more than thirty men wearing dark green warrior outfits was trying to maintain order; they did not let any onlookers from blocking the street, to let real guests on carriages and horses to enter the mansion.

Kou Zhong was greatly surprised, "My Niang! What happens here? Even if this family is holding a banquet, it definitely won't attract these many onlookers!"

Seeing the crowd ahead of them was blocked by those several men in warrior

outfits, Xu Ziling turned around and hastily stopped one of the crowds and asked, “What happen in there?”

The man glowered at him; he vented his frustration on these two boys, “You don’t even know that the world-famous Shi Qingxuan is here? Get lost! Go back to your nest to suck on your old Niang’s breasts!” he angrily said and walked away.

Hearing that, the two boys were dumbstruck.

It should be noted that Shi Qingxuan’s name has shaken the whole country as an amazing woman, due to her flute [xiao, see my note earlier, Book 2 Chapter 8] skill that was shocking the present age. They had heard her name as early as when they were still in Yangzhou, it’s just that they did not know which person had this much face that he was able to invite her to perform here. Rumor has it that she had lived a reclusive life, not many people were able to enjoy her flute music, but those who had heard her had all prostrated themselves in admiration.

Kou Zhong elbowed Xu Ziling’s flank and said with a giggle, “We won’t have to worry about being lonely tonight; there are both a show to enjoy and wine to drink.”

Xu Ziling’s heart warmed up; he laughed and said, “If you drink again, I won’t accompany you.”

“I won’t drink!” Kou Zhong hastily said, “Come!”

Seeing the path ahead was blocked, he led Xu Ziling going around in big circle and arrived at the rear wall of this grand residence, which occupied a land close to a hundred mu [1 mu is approximately 1/5 of a hectare, or about ½ an acre].

They lightly leaped over the high wall, and landed on a deserted rear courtyard. Walking toward the front of the building, they saw the big garden behind the main building was as bright as day with colored lanterns hanging everywhere, and it was packed with maids and guests.

The two boys brushed the dust from their clothes and then swaggered to join the crowd, feeling very excited in their hearts.

With 'golden eyes blazing gaze' Kou Zhong sized up the meticulously dressed female guests who looked like 'lovely scene of blossoming flowers swaying in the breeze', while from occasionally pointing out and making idle remarks about those women's appearance; it appeared that he has indeed gotten over Li Xiuning.

When they squeezed themselves into the inside hall of the main building, they saw that the atmosphere was even more lively. Everybody was excitedly discussing Shi Qingxuan's flute skill, as if they all were experts who have had extensive research about her.

Inside the hall, leaning against the wall were a dozen of tables full with hors d'oeuvres and all kinds of delicacies for everybody to enjoy.

Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling along as he squeezed himself left and right toward the tables. He sighed and said, "If I had known this good place, we could have come here to have dinner!"

Xu Ziling suddenly let out a muffled cry and pulled Kou Zhong to hide behind a stone pillar, as if he wanted to hide from certain people.

Kou Zhong was baffled. "What's the matter?" he asked in confusion.

Xu Ziling pointed his finger, "Look!" he said.

Kou Zhong stuck out his head to look. He saw among a crowd of men and women guests, six or seven respectable looking young masters [gongzi] in, were chatting around two beautiful young women; it was quite noticeable. His spirit aroused, he said, "Those two girls are very pretty."

"I don't mean them!" Xu Ziling angrily said, "Can't you look a bit farther than that? You said you won't be so easy to be tempted by women."

Kou Zhong reluctantly looked away from the girls, and saw toward the edge of the hall there was a cluster of rosewood chairs, where three men were sat. Other people could only stand on the side, emphasizing the status of these three men even more.

One of the men had snow-white hair and beard, his bearing bold and powerful, but his clothes were tattered. Although he was sitting down, he still gave the impression of his magnificent build that was as majestic as the mountain.

Another man was wearing long gown, the hair on his temples was peppered with white spots, so that people knew that he was definitely not a young man; but his appearance looked like a middle-aged man, carrying a distinguished and scholarly air of a Sect's leader, his manners elegant, giving the impression that he was an out of the ordinary, free from vulgarity, man.

These days Kou Zhong's experience has advanced greatly, yet he still felt that these two were outstanding characters.

Accompanied these two was a middle-aged man dressed in a high-ranking government official attire; very lordly, and gave the impression that he was an astute and formidable man.

Kou Zhong was wondering in his heart; although it appeared that these three were special personage, Xu Ziling should not make so much fuss about it.

This moment Xu Ziling's voice was heard next to his ear, "Isn't that Shen Naitang who we encountered the other day?"

Kou Zhong jumped in fright; hastily he swept his gaze over the dozen or so people who stood around these three men, and he quickly found Shen Naitang.

That day the two boys were detained by Du Fuwei in relation to the 'Secret to Long Life', along the way they encountered Shen Naitang and Liang Shidou's son, Liang Shunming, and the others. A conflict broke out, which gave the two boys the opportunity to escape in the midst of the confusion. These days he did not remember them anymore, but now that he saw Shen Naitang, immediately he recalled Shen Naitang's beautiful niece Shen Wushuang.

Xu Ziling said in a low voice, "Hurry up, let's leave!"

"Why would we want to leave?" Kou Zhong argued, "Without listening to Shi Qingxuan's flute, we cannot leave. Besides, old fellow Shen has not seen us yet." And then he added, "That official looking guy must be the host. I wonder who those two are?"

Temporarily Xu Ziling cast Shen Naitang out of his mind; answering Kou Zhong, he said, "Just look at how respectful the other men are, we know that they are not ordinary people. Hey! Ultimate martial art experts must have this kind imposing style!"

Right this moment, it was as if that bold and powerful old man and the scholar in long gown have sensed the two boys' staring at them; as if having prior agreement, they both shot a glance toward the two boys.

The two boys jumped in fright, they hastily withdrew to hide behind the pillar.

Kou Zhong exclaimed in low voice, "My Niang! Experts are indeed experts; they are definitely not a play thing."

Flustered and panicked, Xu Ziling felt that someone was approaching him from behind. At first he thought it was just a guest walking by, but he clearly sensed that the person's hand was about to tap his shoulder.

It was a subtle feeling that was hard to describe with words, he did not see the other person's movement at all, but he clearly just knew.

In this instant, his mind entered the realm of clear water, not rippled, that can reflect the bright moon in the sky; he just knew that the other person did not mean him any harm.

The hand patted his shoulder; it was gentle and soft.

Kou Zhong also felt something was wrong, both he and Xu Ziling turned around

at the same time.

As soon as they saw who it was, their soul flew away and scattered.

Because that person was the Dong Ming Princess who dressed as a handsome scholar. The one person in the world that they did not wish to see the most.

Book 4 Chapter 3 – Shooting Star From The North

All of a sudden, the two boys were surrounded.

Dong Ming Sect's young Commander-in-chief Shang Ming and two generals Shang Bang and Shang Kuiyi [sic. Last chapter it was Kuitai] appeared from the crowd at the same time. Along with Shan Wanjing they enveloped the two boys in front of the wooden pillar. All escape routes were sealed.

Kou Zhong forced a laugh and said, "Everybody, how are you? Are you here to enjoy the show?"

Shang Ming let out a cold snort and said with disdain, "Despicable man!"

Shan Wanjing's jade countenance was icy-cold as she stared hatefully at Xu Ziling, "I thought you were captured and taken away," she coldly said, "But now that I see you are as lively as a dragon and as animated as a tiger, I know that you are wallowing in the mire with Yuwen Chengdu and came with the intention to strike us. This time it is called 'heaven's net has wide meshes, but nothing escapes it' [idiom from Laozi, c. 73AD]."

Xu Ziling shook his hand and said, "Princess, please do not misunderstand; not only we do not know Yuwen Chengdu, we have big enmity with his Yuwen Clan."

Shang Bang angrily said, "It's very rare that Madame thought highly of you, yet you insist on breaking her heart. I don't care whether you know Yuwen Chengdu or not, whether you are related to him or not, but you stole something, and that

is an undeniable fact.”

Shang Kuiyi’s eyes exuded murderous intention as he asked, “Who actually sent you?”

Kou Zhong smiled apologetically and said, “Whatever it is, we can talk it over; how could there be anybody sending us?”

Because both sides were talking in low voices, in the other guests’ eyes, they were just like old friends who happened to meet and were having idle chat. Nobody knew that they were in a ‘sword-drawn-and-bow-bent’ kind of dangerous situation; that the situation could easily escalate into a fatal one.

Shan Wanjing’s hatred and anger stare toward them subsided; she spoke indifferently, “If nobody giving you direction, how did you know such account book existed?”

Shang Ming continued on, “Speaking with these low lives is just a waste of time; let’s take them away.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling saw a gleam of hope. They knew that these people were giving face to the host, hence they did not dare to hastily break into fighting, and thus destroying the harmonious atmosphere in this place.

Kou Zhong smiled mischievously, “If you fight, this martial art expert will immediately shout for help; therefore, before you fight, please think it over three times.”

Before he even finished talking, Shan Wanjing and Shang Ming already made their move.

Shan Wanjing’s jade hand slide out of her sleeve at an unimaginable speed toward the acupoint on Xu Ziling’s lower waist, creating a ‘swish’ noise of her qi splitting the air.

Shang Ming’s five fingers were open into a claw, grabbing toward Kou Zhong’s

arm.

Both of them had the same intention, *i.e.* they wanted to subdue the two boys before they could shout asking for help. However, although Shan and Shang, two people's movement was swift and fierce, their shoulders were absolutely still. Coupled with Shang Bang and Shang Kuiyi blocking other people's view, although there was no lack of Wulin masters in the hall, there was still no one noticed the changes.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling knew that it was a critical moment; if Dong Ming Sect people found out that the account book was in their possession, even if they jumped into the Yellow River, it would still be difficult to wash away the suspicion.

In that instant, the two boys entered the 'still-water-in-the-well' realm. All movements seemed to be slowing down considerably.

Xu Ziling did not misjudge the speed, as well as the angle and strength, of Shan Wanjing's finger jab, at all. He even had a very clear understanding that if he competed with her in speed, he would definitely be defeated. Moreover, the only way he could withstand the attack was taking advantage of the opponent's underestimation of him.

With all these thoughts flashed in his mind in lightning speed, he already drew a countermeasure strategy.

Before the finger even touched his body, Shan Wanjing's true qi had already penetrated his skin, attacking the acupoint on the right side of his lower flank. The true qi flowed along his arteries to strike the major acupoint on his backbone.

And then Shan Wanjing's delicate finger touched his lower waist.

Xu Ziling's mind became very clear. He used his thought to control his qi to meet the true qi entering his artery and acupoint. And then the muscle of his waist contracted to prevent the opponent's jab from hitting him head-on.

Shan Wanjing was delighted that her strike was going smoothly, suddenly she felt that not only did her fingertip hit something soft without any resistance at all, her opponent also sent out a surge of energy that her finger slipped to the side.

While she was still in shock, Xu Ziling reached out to touch her cheek.

Meanwhile, Kou Zhong was gnashing his teeth and giving everything he had to deal with Shang Ming's attack. His palm sliced across Shang Ming's right hand that changed from claw into a fist.

'Bang!' There was a dull thud as Shang Ming's body was jolted and he was forced to take half a step back. On the other hand, Kou Zhong was shaken and crashed onto the stone pillar behind him. It was so painful that he let out a muffled groan.

Shan Wanjing and Shang Ming had never imagined that the two boys would have this kind of resisting power. The former let out a tender scream and dodged Xu Ziling's frivolous hand. Before she could launch a follow-up attack, Xu Ziling already hid on the other side of the stone pillar behind Kou Zhong's back.

If they fought for real, based on Shan Wanjing's prowess, with which she was able to take Du Fuwei's attack, perhaps the two boys fighting together would not even last ten stances against her. However, one, she did not really wish to harm or even kill them, she merely wanted to subdue Xu Ziling; two, because she did not wish to disturb other people, hence she only used thirty, forty percent of her strength. It was only because she had misjudged Xu Ziling's skill that now she could only stare blankly and let the two boys slipped away.

As Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling circled to the other side of the pillar, they happened to come face to face with the awe-inspiring old man and the refined, lofty-looking scholar. The two men's eyes met the two boys', immediately an astonished look flashed through their eyes.

Worst yet, Shen Naitang also saw them and was greatly surprised.

This moment Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling did not have time to worry about other people. They rushed several steps forward into the crowd of several dozen clamoring men and women, straight toward the front door.

While they were still several steps away from the door, shadows flashed, two men and one woman blocked their way. The woman stood akimbo and shouted, "Little dogs, you want to run away?"

The two boys promptly halted their steps. When they looked up, they found out that it was the almond-eyed Shen Wushuang, while on her left and right were this crafty and unruly woman's two martial brothers, Meng Chang and Meng Ran. Meeting their enemies, their eyes turned red in fury.

Meanwhile Shan Wanjing and the others, four people already caught up behind the two boys, but since they were unclear about the two boys' relationship with Shen Wushuang, three people, they also halted their steps and just calmly observing from the side.

Obviously Shen Wushuang did not know Shan Wanjing; her countenance immediately changed, "Turns out you have your comrades here, no wonder you put on so much air."

Kou Zhong was an expert in teasing techniques; he giggled and said, "Wushuang Mei [younger sister, term of endearment] misunderstood. They just asked us to go outside so that they could study our punching and kicking skill."

Shen Wushuang shrieked, "Who's your Wushuang Mei?"

Xu Ziling interjected, "We are all of the same side, let's not quarrel, shall we? We just come here as guests, not to fight with other people."

From behind, Shan Wanjing impatiently said, "Quickly make way!"

Shen Wushuang was so angry at Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling that she was spouting smoke through her seven orifices; hearing Shan Wanjing, her anger turned toward her. "You are the one who should get lost," she said furiously,

“Let me punish these two little dogs first, and then I’ll settle the account with you.”

Seeing she was humiliating his Princess, Shang Ming laughed coldly and said, “Stinky girl, what makes you think that you are qualified to settle the account with us?”

This time it was Meng Chang and Meng Ran who fought for their martial sister. “How dare you?” they shouted angrily in unison.

The more they talked the more both sides lost their temper, prompting the guests around them to raise their eyebrows.

Seeing the commotion, Shen Naitang came over. “What are you doing?” he scolded them, “Do you know what kind of place this is?”

He was relying on ‘old affecting the old’; as soon as he said that, from all three sides people were rebuking them.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stole a glance around, and saw like tidal wave the guests separated onto two sides, so that the sitting people’s line of sight was open and they were able to see the situation near the door.

Just by this spontaneous action of the guests one could see the three people’s status must be out of the ordinary. Everybody was looking at them reverently, so that in that moment they had become the ‘target of a multitude arrows’.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud; bowing with cupped fist he said, “It has nothing to do with us, two brothers; they are just quarreling among themselves.”

Shen Wushuang was so angry that her pretty face turned ashen; she was about to retort, but Shen Naitang stopped her.

Now all gazes naturally fell onto Shan Wanqing, four people.

This time Shan Wanjing came because of Shi Qingxuan's fame; she was using the invitation card presented by Li Shimi, and did not have any desire to publicize their status, yet she did not wish to offend the master of this mansion even more. Although she was fuming with anger and wanted to kill the two boys very much, she did not have any choice but to smile slightly and spoke to the scholar, "Forgive us for alarming Seniors. Ha! We don't have any problem."

Leading the others, she mingled into a crowd of guests on the side.

And thus a disturbance has been settled.

However, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were groaning inwardly, because they could not stay, but they could not leave even more.

The man wearing government official attire suddenly spoke up, "Two Xiao Xiongdi, could you come over to meet with us?"

The hundreds of guests in the hall were about to continue inquiring about what had just happened; hearing him, they all showed astonishment on their faces. Why would he be interested in these two kids?

Actually, unlike Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had guessed, this official looking gentleman was not the master of this mansion; he was also one of the guests. Moreover, he was a Sui minister who held the balance of power in the imperial court, plus he was also one of several martial art masters within the imperial court.

This man's name was Wang Shichong[1]. He was under the order of Emperor Yang of Sui to lead the troops to deal with Zhai Rang and Li Mi's Wagang Army. Amidst his busy schedule, he sneaked in to this place to see Shi Qingxuan's graceful bearing.

And he had heard about Yuwen Huaji hunting down Kou and Xu, two boys. This time his heart was moved with suspicion.

As for the majestic looking old man in tattered clothes and the old scholar who

looked like a middle-aged man, their background was also not a small matter.

The former was known as 'Mount Huang's Hermit', Ouyang Xiyi, who had made his name for at least forty years as an ultimate martial art master. In Wulin, he shared the same seniority with Xuan Men [black/mysterious school (I think Book 1 has 'Bi Xuan')] number one master 'Shan Ren' Ning Daoqi, but he has gone into retirement for many years. This time he came to visit the master of this mansion, and happened to be there for this grand event.

As for the old scholar, he was the master of the mansion, Wang Tong, a great scholar of the present age. In terms of learning theory, there was 'no one to his right (side) under the heavens'. In terms of martial art, he was implicitly in the same league as first class martial art experts like Zhai Rang, Dou Jiande, Du Fuwei, Ouyang Xiyi, as well as the master of the four clans.

Wang Tong's character was peculiar. After he reached fame at the age of 30, he never fought anymore. He had forsaken the 'wu' [martial art, military] and embraced the 'wen' [literature, civil]; not teaching martial art, but amassing disciples to give lectures, and was prolific in producing literary works.

The most interesting work he did was his imitation of 'Spring and Autumn Annals' [722-481 BC], called 'Yuan Jing' [primary/first classic/scripture], and imitation of 'Analects of Confucius' called 'Zhong Shuo' [middle/center speech/theory], in which he said, "There is no place under the heavens where I haven't gone to, haven't been from, only the way I have never been through." [Sorry, this passage is beyond me.]

Also, only because he was so talented that he was like a lone flower admiring itself [i.e. self-love, narcissist] that he had never betrayed his friendship with Shi Qingxuan.

Because Shan Wanqing felt responsible, she also did not dare offend this nobody-dared-to-provoke aloof figure for the sake of the two boys.

The guests who came to the event this time were people with position or status in town and surrounding counties; if not the head of a sect or school, then they must be a tycoon, high official or people of nobility. But even the most

arrogant people would not dare to display shocking bad behavior in this kind of situation.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged glances, they both groaned inwardly. While they were stuck without any room either to advance or to retreat, there was a series of screams from the main entrance. Followed by two men flew in the air and fell face up. 'Bang! Bang!' they both landed on the floor flat on their back.

Like a tide the guests separated to the left and right, opening up a large empty space near the door.

Looking at the two men who guarded the gate, who this moment could only groan and were unable to crawl up, everybody's countenance was changed; nobody could imagine who would be this extremely daring and rush to this place to deliver his life?

While everybody was looking at each other in shock, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling seized this opportunity to squeeze themselves into the crowd.

The inner hall was already crowded, now that a large vacant area appeared, everybody was tightly squeezed against each other, so that even Dong Ming Princess and the others, who considered them as their prey, momentarily were unable to get close to them.

Immediately several men appeared to help the two guards up on their feet. And then amidst the clamor a man in blue clothes rushed over and grabbed the two men and thundered, "Who dare to come here and commit this atrocity?"

A cold snort was heard from outside the door. Two people, one man and one woman, calmly appeared at the door.

The man was tall, rather heroic looking and big. Although his face was long and narrow, but it was chiseled, and perfect like a marble statue. His skin was even more fair, soft and smooth than a girl's, yet there was nothing effeminate about him. On the contrary, because of his sharp eyes, he exuded a thick manly, almost overbearing, type of charm.

A strip of red cloth was tied across his forehead. Inside his blue-green robe, he wore a skintight yellow warrior outfit, plus a leather vest, making him appeared to have broader shoulders and narrower waist. Hanging on his waist left and right were a sword and a saber. His age was approximately between twenty-four, twenty-five; his form was extremely formidable.

Most of the guests present were accustomed to people of all aspects of society. Seeing this man strolled in with his hands behind his back, completely calm and composed, they knew this person was not simple at all. Moreover, from his high nose and deep eyes, they knew that it he was not a hu man [non-Han], then he must have had some hu blood in him. Nobody did not feel surprised.

The woman's appearance did not look like women of Central Earth [Zhong Tu] either, but she was clearly not of the same race as the man. However, whether it was her face, her figure, her general facial appearance or her skin, she was a picture of beauty that no one was not enchanted. Only her expression was as cold as ice and frost, yet her implicit charm and good looks was not the least bit inferior to Shan Wanjing, Li Xiuning, those kind of ultimate beauties.

She also acted strangely; as soon as she stepped over the threshold, she deliberately held herself back about half a zhang behind the man, as if she wanted to keep a distance between her and the man.

A long laughter echoed from the mouth of Ouyang Xiyi, followed by this Wulin senior master who had made his name for several decades boomed, "Alright! Young hero, what is your relationship with Tujue's Bi Xuan?"

The clamoring noise of people making comments immediately died down, even the big man in blue who was ready to fight was also shaken and did not dare to take any action. From this, it could be clearly seen how flourishing Bi Xuan's prestige was inside and outside of the Wulin world of the Central Plains.

A look of surprise appeared on the young martial art expert's face, his eyes flashed with sharp ray. After carefully sizing up Ouyang Xiyi, he said nonchalantly, "Turns out it is 'Mount Huang's Hermit', Ouyang Xiyi; no wonder your vision is this brilliant. However, Zaixia not only have nothing to do with Bi

Xuan, it is he who desires to be related to me.”

When the people heard this, most of them were so astonished that their mouths were agape. He was able to recognize Ouyang Xiyi, it was not surprising, because an imposing, bold and powerful old man like Ouyang Xiyi was rarely seen in Jianghu; coupled with tattered clothes he wore, it was like he was displaying his trademark for all the world to see.

What was astonishing was that this kid knew perfectly well that the opponent was Ouyang Xiyi, yet he still dared to call him by name like that. Plus he did not seem to consider Bi Xuan, who was hailed as one of the three best martial art masters under the heavens, as someone worthy in his eyes. This was the shocking part.

Kou Zhong leaned close to Xu Ziling’s ear and whispered, “That beauty looks a bit like Niang.”

Xu Ziling nodded in agreement. Not that he thought that the face of the woman in white who came uninvited resembled Fu Junchuo’s, but her clothes and her demeanor appeared to be unusually similar, only she appeared to be seven or eight years younger than Fu Junchuo. [Actually, the text says ‘Fu Junchan’, but since IMHO she was a very important character, I decided to change it to ‘Fu Junchuo’.]

Kou Zhong continued, “That guy seems to be very formidable; otherwise his eyes would not be as bright as lightning flashes.”

Before Xu Ziling had time to respond, Ouyang Xiyi suddenly stood up; instantly there was an overwhelming ‘ten-thousand-men-unable-to-withstand’ like aura emanating from him, giving everybody on the scene some kind of suffocating feeling.

A gentle and soft voice suddenly rang out, “Young man, what qualification do you have that even Bi Xuan wanted to associate himself with your little life?”

Without even looking at the person who talked among the crowd, the young man smiled and said, “I don’t think in this matter any explanation is necessary!”

Wang Tong was sitting motionless with rapt attention; fixing his gaze on the man, he said indifferently, "Sire has just stepped over the door and you already injured people. Although Ol' Wang is no good in brandishing saber or playing with stick, I am compelled to do something. State your name!"

At this point everybody knew that Wang Tong was really angry.

Wang Shichong was also sizing up the heroic looking young man with a grim expression on his face. He spoke in deep voice, "With Old Wang and Old Ouyang making the decision, Chen Dangjia [the one in charge, see Ren Meimei, Book 3 Chapter 7] may go back home!"

As soon as he said those words, the hall filled with several hundred people became deadly quiet [orig. Crow and peacock make no sound].

Although his remark was polite, it was tantamount to Wang Shichong telling the person he called Master Chen not to provoke this man.

Wang Shichong was publicly known as one of the few top martial art experts in Jianghu, naturally his vision was extremely keen. If he said so, then that heroic looking young man's martial art must have had reached a universally shocking level.

It should also be noted that Master Chen was the first Master [Dangjia] of Dongping County's biggest Sect, the Qingshuang Pai [dark-green frost sect], Chen Yuanzhi. Her Qingshuang Sword was renown near and far, enough to rank her among the Wulin masters.

Chen Yuanzhi's countenance changed slightly. After hesitating for half a day she stepped aside.

A hint of cold laugh appeared on the corner of the heroic looking young man's mouth; calmly he said, "Zaixia Ba Fenghan. This time I came together with this young lady as my companion, she is ..."

The beautiful woman in white coldly said, "You are you, I am me, who's your companion? Humph, are you scared?"

While everybody was stunned, Ba Fenghan showed an awkward expression, as if he did not know whether to laugh or to cry. Yet surprisingly he still looked unusually natural and unrestrained, so that both men and women in the hall could not help but were attracted to him. Even Shan Wanjing, who was usually very proud and arrogant, felt her heart palpitating.

Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling's ear again, "This guy's outward appearance is very unique. Hey! Let's slip away!"

With a bitter smile Xu Ziling replied, "How do you slip away?"

Kou Zhong swept his gaze around, dejectedly he had to dispel the idea, because by this time even people who were originally in the garden had thronged inside to see the excitement. The hall was even more jam-packed than before that it was difficult to move for even a cun. Besides, Shan Wanjing and the others, who were standing across the room, were staring at them hatefully, so that there would not be much different between leaving right now and delivering their lives.

Ouyang Xiyi's hand slowly moved toward the hilt of his sword. In an instant the close to seven hundred people in the main hall all felt that the air temperature of the hall seemed to be dropping rapidly; the hall felt thick with murderous aura, which permeated into the entire room.

Everybody knew that this senior martial art master, who had not exchanged swords for several decades, would make his move really soon; they could not refrain from withdrawing backward as much as possible to make room.

Ba Fenghan's tiger eyes flickered like flashes of lightning, his outer robe started to move although there was no wind; it fluttered and produced rustling noise. Unexpectedly his valor was not the least bit inferior from his opponent; just like he was very confident that he was unequalled under the heavens, insufferably arrogant.

Both Wang Tong and Wang Shichong looked extremely somber.

People with discerning eyes all knew that the moment Ouyang Xiyi raised his body, these two men, old and young, would unleash their grandeur to decide who was superior and who was inferior.

What was amazing was that in terms of momentum, this foreigner Ba Fenghan was able to match Ouyang Xiyi as his equal. If this matter was spread all over Jianghu, it would be enough to elevate the nameless Ba Fenghan to earth-shattering fame.

The woman in white stood motionless, but her eyes scanned the crowd, as if she was oblivious of the imminent battle in front of her, while everybody else was waiting with bated breath for the moment the two combatants would cross swords.

[1] Wang Shichong (-621) was a real historical figure, a general of late Sui and opponent of early Tang.

Book 4 Chapter 4 – The Amazing Woman Qingxuan

Ouyang Xiyi took three steps forward, shortening the distance between he and Ba Fenghan by two zhang.

His imposing manner as he stepped, combined with his majestic-as-the-mountain build and his sharp eyes, naturally highlighted his irresistible presence.

A faint smile was still hanging out of the corner of Ba Fenghan's mouth; he flung his hands, which were originally behind his back, out of the robe, separately grasping the saber handle and the sword hilt, so that nobody knew whether he was going to use saber or sword, or perhaps the combination of saber and sword.

As soon as Ouyang Xiyi stopped, he threw his head backwards and let out a long laugh. Immediately it was as if the entire huge hall was rustling with shudder.

'Qiang!' Ba Fenghan pulled the saber in his right hand out a little, instantly it produced a whiff of unparalleled fierce saber qi, opposing Ouyang Xiyi's overwhelming aura.

Right this instant, Ba Fenghan's saber left its scabbard, almost like a rainbow as he took the initiative to attack.

At the same instant, Ouyang Xiyi also pulled his sword to attack.

Two streams of formless, noiseless sword qi and saber qi, just before the sword and saber made contact, the two weapons wound around each other before they finally collided. It was only then did a genuinely good and hard ringing noise reverberated across the hall.

Ba Fenghan suddenly floated backward, and stood holding his saber across in front of his body.

He still looked calm and at ease as before, there was even a smile on his face, giving the impression that he was not inferior in any respect to this bold and powerful senior martial art master's tiger-like body as he stood steadily. Hence other people could not possibly think that he was being pushed back by the opponent.

Ouyang Xiyi was standing motionless, still as imposing as before, but the upper part of his body swayed occasionally, while there was a disbelief look on his eyes.

None of the guests was not emotionally shaken. Nobody would ever imagined that this twenty something Ba Fenghan was able to take Ouyang Xiyi's overwhelming strength head-on.

Under the stare of the guests, Ba Fenghan threw his head backwards and let out a long laugh, "Good sword! I never expected that I, Ba Fenghan, have just stepped into the Central Plains, and already met a martial art expert. Thank you for the advice!"

As soon as his voice fell, unexpectedly he took the initiative again to attack.

Wang Shichong and Wang Tong exchanged glances; not only they could see the astonishment in each other's heart, they could also see the murderous intention growing in each other's mind.

If they did not get rid of this kid, he might grow into another Bi Xuan.

Ouyang Xiyi also had the same thought as they did. He was even clearer that Ba Fenghan would be Tujue's most powerful figure after Bi Xuan. At this age he

had already reached such an unfathomable level of martial art skill. Plus from the way he treated the guards, he knew that this kid's character was ruthless. If this kind of man committed evil, the disaster he created would be greater.

Once he made up his mind, his hand moved. Ouyang Xiyi let out a cold snort; his sword met the opponent's saber hack sweeping toward his left flank.

This sword movement seemed average, nothing special about it, but it was actually the essence of Ouyang Xiyi's whole-life training; it had reached the 'something-rotten-turns-into-something-magical' level, a 'great-skill-looks-clumsy' state. Even if 'Wu Zun' Bi Xuan himself came, he would not dare to underestimate this move.

Ouyang Xiyi's 'chen sha jianfa' [sinking sand sword technique] focused on overwhelming power, with a set of rigid movements; victory and defeat would be decided in just a few strokes. This moment he fought with killing intention, his movement differed from when he was just testing the water earlier.

Ba Fenghan's eyes gleamed with flashing rays, his steps followed some kind of fantastic footwork, only he kept a distance of about a zhang from his opponent, making the spectators felt that he was not going to go for a direct attack, but constantly changing the angle and direction of this attack, yet it also felt as if he was going to advance in a straight line.

If this kind of hard-to-describe feeling has caused headache to spectators, its effect on the opponent who was directly in front of him would not be difficult to imagine.

For the first time the beauty in white who came with Ba Fenghan showed signs that she was paying attention; her entire being seemed to be absorbed in the fight between the two martial art masters.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were watching with great delight; they gained full understanding of the fight. They came to realization that footwork actually had this kind of wonderful usage.

Ouyang Xiyi let out a sudden roar, fast as lightning he moved across,

unexpectedly he moved toward Ba Fenghan's long saber that was protecting his chest. Neither meeting the saber nor evading backward, he positioned himself about a zhang to the left of his opponent.

Nobody understood why he, who had always been meeting the enemy's attack head-on, would suddenly employ this kind of strategy. Only martial art masters like Wang Tong, Wang Shichong, Shan Wanjing and the others realized that Ouyang Xiyi was unable to see through the opponent's footwork, hence he did not dare to advance prematurely, such that needless to say, the spectators were horrified and depressed.

However, his avoidance was actually very logical; because he was occupying the position where the opponent's saber potential was the weakest. Therefore, he actually did not fall into disadvantageous position at all.

"Good!" Ba Fenghan shouted. Unexpectedly he also withdrew abruptly.

Qi and mind working together, the single sword in Ouyang Xiyi's hand suddenly turned into sword shadows like stormy sea, as he entered the 'pursue and attack' mode like the great river pouring down in torrents.

However, Ba Fenghan seemed to be already anticipating this move. He remained calm like a deep pool with no wind, no waves; his handsome face remain as still as water as he swiftly withdrew about a zhang backwards, and once again charged forward with the saber blocking horizontally.

His retreat and advance was like natural tidal wave; in fact, his entire body resembled nature itself, giving others an indescribable strange feeling.

Wang Tong and the others could no longer conceal the horrified expression on their face.

Ever since Ba Fenghan stepped into the hall, they had already sensed that this kid was not an ordinary person; however, even in their dream they would never imagine that he was this formidable.

‘Dang! Dang! Dang!’ In lightning-fast, flashing-sparks speed, the two combatants exchanged three strikes.

Saber ray radiated all around, sword qi filled the air. Sword sharpness and saber power shrouded an area around three zhang in diameter. Those who stood on the perimeter subconsciously were trying to move back as far away as possible from hair-raising battlefield.

Ba Fenghan suddenly narrowed his line of defense, he only tightly guard a narrow space in front of him. Under Ouyang Xiyi’s stormy-sea, high-waves like attack, wide-open and tightly-closed sword shadows, he moved around like ghost relying on his bizarre footwork.

At a glance he seemed to be falling into a disadvantageous situation, but Wang Tong and the others knew that it was the most ingenious tactic to deal with Ouyang Xiyi.

It should be noted that in order to stay on top of the game by launching continuous attack required a considerable true qi. Supposing Ba Fenghan was able to prolong the current situation, the time when Ouyang Xiyi exhausting his strength would be the moment Ba Fenghan launch a counterattack.

Of course, Ouyang Xiyi had amassed his power for over seventy years, his qi and arteries and veins were long lasting; it was possible that even before Ba Fenghan reached that moment, he would breathe his last first. However, looking at the way he was advancing and retreating right now, nobody would dare to say that Ouyang Xiyi would be able to slaughter him in the next two or three styles.

Wang Tong and Wang Shichong rose up from their seats, but they had to restrain themselves from intervening.

This moment Ouyang Xiyi had other thought. ‘Shua! Shua! Shua!’ successively his sword slashed three times; each slash came from different angle, the power behind the sword varied, sometimes it was light, sometimes it was heavy, so that it would be difficult for the recipient of these attack to get a feel of where the sword edge would be. Yet Ba Fenghan’s long saber obviously moved swiftly, one after another he neutralized the attack. Plus the saber momentum broadened

abruptly; now he took a little bit of initiative in offense, while maintaining the level of his power.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling took a furtive look at Shan Wanjing across the hall; they noticed that her beautiful eyes were open wide without blinking as she was looking dreamily at Ba Fenghan, whose prowess was god-like, and seemed to completely forget about the two boys. Shang Ming and the others, with astonished look on their face, had their attention fixed at the hard fighting in the arena.

If they did not leave now, what were they waiting for?

Despite somewhat reluctant to leave the battle, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling thought their little lives were more important; they squeezed themselves step by step toward the gate.

The people that they squeezed into did not seem to feel anything; they simply automatically moved aside a little bit to let them pass, while their eyes were still fixed on the battle.

As with great difficulty they finally reached the overcrowded gate, the sound of flute [xiao] suddenly arose.

The two boys' curiosity was greatly aroused; in this kind of situation who had the mood to leisurely play the flute? They could not help but focusing their attention to listen.

The flute sounded extremely wonderful, the transitions between phrases varied, but it always fell in between the clashing sound of saber and sword; it appeared present, it appeared hidden, yet it lingered on with every note undefined as if it was casually weaved into the tune as an improvisation. What was more unbelievable was that the tune seemed to blend perfectly with the humming sound of clashing of saber and sword. Note by note breathed question, twists and turns interspersed between phrases, water and milk blended within the flute sound. Even if there were disconnections, the listeners had the feeling that it would continue endlessly, until-death-put-an-end kind of lingering feeling. The flute technique was refined-by-fire quality, with

transformation that was pounded-with-a-pestle-until-it-reaches-beacon-fire perfection.

The flute sound sometimes carried a lofty fervor, sometimes a gloomy hidden bitterness. So high that it reached the endless sky, so low that it reached bottomless pit. Momentarily the listeners were stunned in silence.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were entranced as if their souls were hooked by the flute; for the first time in their life they felt that music could have the charm that was more touching than spoken words, unexpectedly they forgot to escape.

The murderous aura of the two combatants in the arena diminished greatly. After a feint move, the two men moved back, and just stood respectfully to listen to the music.

For the first time the woman in white's frosty jade countenance revealed a subtle sign that her mind was shaken, as if she was somewhat affected by the music.

The flute sound seemed to be intermittent, yet continue to change, and linger endlessly. But it turned soft and quiet; although it continue to dominate every cun of hall, where no sound of breathing was heard, yet it also sounded hard to fathom as if it came from a far away place. The musical composition that could intoxicate people's heart continued to murmur quietly like a succession of the sounds of nature in some mysterious lonely place between the heaven and the earth, evoking pain and pleasure hidden deep within everybody's heart, which welling up and unbearably turning back to hurt their emotion, like a song, but also like a sigh.

The flute sound changed again. This time it carried some kind of restrained passion that bloomed through bright, shining notes, as if gently and tenderly telling the story inside everybody's heart.

And then it stopped abruptly.

Nobody in the hall was able to utter any word.

Wang Tong had already forgotten all about Ba Fenghan, the murderous intention in his heart has completely vanished. Facing upward, he sighed sadly, and then in desolate voice said, "It's finished! It's finished! After listening to Miss Shi's tune, I am afraid henceforth it would be difficult to hear an even finer sound. Miss' flute skill not only reaches the full potential of what your Niang taught you, it also surpasses the source [orig, 'blue surpasses the green']. Wang Tong hereby salutes you."

It was only now that everybody knew that there was a profound relationship between Wang Tong and Shi Qingxuan. Also, seeing how when he mentioned Shi Qingxuan's mother his eyes were glistening with tears, they conjectured that there was a case of unrequited love here.

Ouyang Xiyi's eyes, which radiated sharp power, also grew softer and gentler as he raised his voice, "Since Qingxuan's immortal self is already here, why not come in to let Bobo [paternal uncle, older than one's father] see how much you have grown to resemble Xiuxin."

Everybody was astounded; only then did they realize that the reason they did not see this well-known but mysterious beauty was because it was only a moment ago that she honored them with her presence, right in time to dissolve a fierce fighting with her peerless flute skill.

In loud and clear voice Ba Fenghan said, "If I can see Miss' beautiful face, I, Ba Fenghan, will die without any regret."

By this time his reputation has increased many times over, nobody dared to blame him for speaking conceited nonsense.

There was a gentle sigh coming from the eaves, and then a sweet, clear and soft female voice that no one can describe entered the hall, "Meeting in person is as if not meeting at all. Qingxuan received Niang's last wish to come with a specific purpose in mind to play a tune for two noble Uncles [bo – older than one's father]. Since this matter is accomplished, Qingxuan is leaving."

The people in the hall immediately broke into an uproar, they all urged her to stay.

Shadows flashed to the door, Ba Fenghan and the woman in white disappeared together.

The hall remained extremely chaotic.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling came to their senses; hastily they lifted their feet and slipped out of the door and disappeared into the deserted street.

It could be said that Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had become experts in escaping; taking advantage of the commotion, they swiftly left the mansion, but did not go far at all. They simply went hiding in firewood shed at the backyard of another big house nearby, congratulating each other on their luck.

The two boys lay comfortably on a pile of straw, both felt that their trip to the mansion this time was not in vain.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "Although the evil Princess found out that we are still in the world of the living, but we were able to watch the martial art match between that Fengshi Han[1] and old fellow Ouyang. We also got to hear the flute skill of Jianghu's amazing woman. It was really worth it."

Xu Ziling spoke with envy, "That Fengshi Han is only several years older than we are, but his skill is really strong; I wonder when will we be like him?"

Kou Zhong let out a cold snort and said, "That fellow can't be considered a good man, and he seemed to be very good at seducing women. Those women whom he cast a glance to, they seemed to lose their soul and drop their spirit. I think even your Princess has her soul hooked by him too!"

Xu Ziling sneered and said, "What your Princess my Princess? Only ghost would like that kind of woman who considers everyone else is beneath her. I don't care if she is a stinky fart princess."

Kou Zhong sat up and raised his thumb. "You got guts!" he praised, "Ha! Even I seem to have forgotten my Xiuning Meimei too!"

Xu Ziling swayed his head, "Turns out to poise for battle we must put emphasis on imposing manner. My Niang! How do we build up imposing manner? We can't do that by simply being vicious or flaring out our hatred. If we can face the enemy while chatting and laughing, now that will be the first-class principle."

Kou Zhong pondered for half a day, and then seriously said, "That must be the effect of spirit and internal energy merging together in harmony. Indeed stronger and weaker can be seen right away; this is something that cannot be forced."

After a short pause, he continued, "Do you think that Fengshi Han can catch up with Shi Qingxuan? If she is seduced by him, we won't have any chance."

Xu Ziling frowned and said, "Can you save what little spirit you have not to indulge in wishful thinking? Is Li Xiuning lesson not hard enough for you?"

Embarrassed, Kou Zhong lay back down on the straw. Closing his eyes, he heaved a deep sigh and then dejectedly said, "Very well! First thing tomorrow morning we'll set out to Xingyang to find Susu Jiejie; I will no longer think about anything else."

Xu Ziling suddenly said, "What do you say, based on our qinggong, will we be able to jump over the city wall?"

Kou Zhong was jolted awake, "Are you afraid that government official already recognized us?" he asked.

"Outstanding people like us?" Xu Ziling said, "Ha! We are actually very easy to recognize. If you were him, what would you do?"

Kou Zhong's countenance changed, "Naturally he would inform Yuwen Huagu."

Xu Ziling said, "If we travel far just like this, my main concern is that he would catch us himself. Just by looking at his eyesight and listening to him commanding

that low hand Chen Dangjia to back off, I know that compared to us, he knows more than a thing or two. Therefore, the one I am afraid of right now is him, not the smelly fart Princess.”

“What should we do then?” Kou Zhong asked.

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, “I was just thinking of asking you the same question, yet you still have the face to ask me?”

Kou Zhong racked his brains, and then he slapped his forehead and said, “We only need to hide in here and do not go out of this woodshed for three days, only go out to steal food and drink in the deep of the night, and then after everybody thinks that we have gone far away, we can set out on our journey. Don’t you think this brilliant idea is not brilliant enough?”

Xu Ziling forced himself to exclaim, “Good! Just let us hide in here, training our skill for three his mother’s days. Based on what we experienced these past few days, we’ll master the subject by comprehensive study of what we saw and heard. If we succeed, then we won’t have to desperately run around every time anybody came to kill us.”

Kou Zhong said, “But even after resolving this problem, we still have another problem. That is, after helping Susu Jiejie settling down, will we go to Yangzhou to submit our accusation on Yuwen Huagu to the old Emperor, or are we going to the Eastern Capital and try our luck on the Jade Annulus of He Clan, or go to the Capital to retrieve the Duke Yang Hidden Treasure?”

“What do you think?” Xu Ziling asked in return.

“Do you think I am asking you simply out of respect toward you?” Kou Zhong said.

Xu Ziling crossly said, “If you ask me, then I’ll say that avenging Niang is the most important thing.”

Kou Zhong was upset, “Didn’t I say the same thing?” he said, “Let’s just go to

Jiangdu first, alright?”

Xu Ziling laughed and said, “I actually made you lose your temper. Alright! Just consider it I misunderstood you.”

In the dark, Kou Zhong was silent for half a day. Finally he said, “You are my good brother, the only family I have in this world. No matter what you say to me, I will not lose my temper to you.”

Kou Zhong sat up again. Holding his head in his hands he pondered for a short moment, and then he nodded and said, “You are always more adaptable than me, it is easier for you to feel content, while I always want more. Ay! Living our life, if we don’t achieve anything, how dull will that live be?”

“I absolutely agree with what you said,” Xu Ziling replied, “Honestly, it’s just in terms of girls that I do not have as much interest as you do; only in the case that I met someone who can make me unable to restrain my emotions, otherwise my heart won’t be moved so easily. But if I really like her, I will not change forever; I definitely will not have ‘three hearts two intentions’ [i.e. indecisiveness].”

Hugging his knees, Kou Zhong buried his head between his legs. He mumbled, “Do you think it is so easy for me to fall in love with different girl? Like Li Xiuning, evil Princess, even our beautiful Shifu, and that b1tch Shen Luoyan, I always thought that they are not bad at all. But I know that I won’t fall in love with any of those women. When all is said and done, am I more passionate than you, or am I more heartless than you?” [Translator’s note: although I am a bit hesitant to translate ‘poniang’ as b1tch, I can see that this is a recurring term, hence I decided to just use ‘b1tch’ for lack of better term.]

It was quite a while later than Xu Ziling finally responded unenthusiastically, “I think because girls are not your ultimate goal at all, at least I feel that you, Zhong Shao, are a natural born leader, what you like the most is to stick out your head to be in charge, plus I also like it that way very much. Ay! It’s late! I want to practice.”

Listening to the sound of Xu Ziling breathing evenly, Kou Zhong could not help replaying each stance each style of the fierce fighting between Ba Fenghan and

Ouyang Xiyi. For a short while his mind was entranced, and completely oblivious to the loss of time.

By the time Xu Ziling woke up, the sky was already bright.

[1] Fengshi Han – From ‘Ba Fenghan’, feng means ‘point/tip/edge of a tool/weapon’, han means ‘cold’, Fengshi (different ‘feng’ character) means ‘rheumatism’, same ‘han’ character

Book 4 Chapter 5 – Peerless Yuwen

Three days passed in the blink of an eye. The two boys were a bit reluctant to leave.

In these three days, they felt like they had returned to the place where Fu Junchuo was buried, back to their previous hazy, blurry state of mind, where day and night they buried themselves in training. Only when they heard voices did they withdraw back to their hiding place.

To be able to watch Ba Fenghan and Ouyang Xiyi's shaking-to-the-core battle, the benefit they reaped was indeed no small matter.

Previously they lacked guidance in their training, just like a blind man riding a blind horse, or like in the absence of a target an archer shot the arrow randomly.

But this time they had clear direction and objective; they understood that spirit, true qi, and strategy, three factors must merge together before they could be true martial art experts.

Even they themselves did not know that the qi cultivation principle they learned from the 'Secret to Long Life' in itself already emphasizing essence, qi, and spirit, the supreme marvelous method.

This moment they acted without thinking, incidentally they grasped the essence of it, hence although it was a mere three-day period, they have received the lifelong benefit of breakthrough in the martial art way.

After further discussion, they decided to stay seven more days.

It was precisely this decision that made them avoid a disaster.

After Wang Shichong grew suspicious of them that night, he talked with Shen Naitang, and found out that the two boys had been with Du Fuwei, hence he knew that two treasures had just slipped away in front of his face. Hastily he dispatched his men to hunt the fugitives everywhere, while at the same time notified Yuwen Shi, another important figure within the Yuwen Clan who happened to be in the vicinity, to personally come and take charge of this matter. Nearly all of Dongping County was turned upside down before they finally declared that the two boys had escaped far away.

If this hunt and arrest operation was presided over by Du Fuwei, he would have known that the two boys were still remaining within the city walls. But how could Yuwen Shi have thought that the two boys could be that calm and not run away. After five days, the search network spread over to the neighboring counties, and no longer focused on Dongping County.

By early morning the sixth day, the two boys remembered Susu, plus they felt a bit bored from training.

“Didn’t Niang say that the best way of training martial art is to advance intentionally without any intention?” Kou Zhong said, “These past two days we placed great care in training, but we feel a bit unsettled and impatient instead.”

Xu Ziling agreed, “I was just thinking about the same thing. Niang said that in cultivating internal energy we must have a strict control over body heat; cold and heat must be in moderation. We were immersing ourselves in hard training, apparently we went too far; we’d better slow down for the time being.”

Kou Zhong said, “In that case, we’d better immediately leave for Xingyang, I am afraid Susu Jie already met a mishap.”

“We can’t just walked out of the city walls like this,” Xu Ziling said, “Can’t say for sure, but that government official might have issued an order to arrest us. Don’t forget that Shen Naitang knew who we are.”

“Humph!” Kou Zhong snorted coldly, “In the eyes of the imperial court, isn’t the old Shen in cahoots with the rebel thief Liang Shidou? It’s just that other people didn’t know!”

After a short pause he continued, “Right now the weather is getting colder, we ought to buy some warm clothing, and while we are at it, we may also buy ropes, hooks, that kind of things. And then when the night comes we can climb the wall and get out of the city. It’s a foolproof plan.”

The plan was decided, the two boys felt a little reluctant to leave this woodshed to kick-start their next move.

That night, without any alarm without any danger they leaped over the city wall to get out, just like a little bird leaving its cage. After ascertaining the direction to Xinyang, they ran all night in the wilderness. By daybreak, their body weary their strength exhausted.

When they were seated, Kou Zhong laughed and said, “We are really stupid. We actually forgot that we have ample riches. Later on let’s buy two horses to ride instead of walk, won’t we avoid the hardship of journeying on foot?”

Xu Ziling also laughed and said, “Riding horses is not as good as taking a boat. We might as well buy a small fishing boat, you and I can take turn steering the boat and sleeping and practicing martial art; won’t that be fun?”

Kou Zhong shook his head and said, “You think we are on a scenic tour? Our destination is the nest of Wagang Army; if you were an officer, would you let people coming and going at will? Land route is a bit more dependable. Ha, since you reminded me, let us by a carriage, so we can still take turn driving and resting. Ha, we save time, we save energy. Ha, when you are coming with me, nothing can go wrong!”

Laughing and swearing, the two boys ran fast to the largest town nearby, bought a simple and crude carriage and two healthy horses to pull it along, and continued their journey.

It was the first time that the two boys owned such an expensive and very

useful means of transportation; they doted on the two horses very much. The white horse they called it Bai'er [simply 'dear white'], the grey one they called it Hui'er [ash/grey].

Four days later, they arrived at Wagang City, where Zhai Rang raised his army in rebellion. Only this moment the city already fell into the imperial army's hands.

The two boys barely entered the city, they already felt the tensed atmosphere. Not only the city defense was reinforced, on the street they came across groups after groups of troops going God knows where.

After finding an inn, Kou Zhong tipped the inn assistant with specific thing in mind, he repeatedly told him, a thousand times, ten thousand times, to take a good care of their horses, while in passing, he inquired about the current situation.

While having a meal at the restaurant attached to the inn, he said in low voice, "Turns out Li Mi originally wanted to attack the Eastern Capital Luoyang. For some reason, the secret leaked out, and now the plan changed to attacking Xingluo Cang [barn/warehouse]. But the defender of Eastern Capital Wang Yangdong has dispatched Liu Changgong to intercept him. Furthermore, the defender of Xingyang's Western Tiger Prison Pei Renji is prepared to trail Li Mi's rear leg. It seems that Li Mi's circumstances really isn't so optimistic."

Xu Ziling was puzzled, "Isn't Wagang Army's big boss Susu Jie's master Zhai Rang? Why is it that you open your mouth, you close your mouth, it is Li Mi this and Li Mi that?"

Kou Zhong shrugged his shoulders and said, "It was exactly what that inn assistant told me. It's very possible that because Zhai Rang was wounded by that strange man, he needs to live in seclusion to recuperate. But then again, ay! I really hope he is not killed by Li Mi."

Speaking to this point, the two boys' heart was burning with anxiety; they really wished they could grow wings to fly to Xingyang.

With a wry smile Kou Zhong said, “I just asked the inn assistant for direction to Xingyang, the assistant strongly urged me not to go there, and he said Yang Wu has become a mess, and that we can meet danger at any time. Ha, he said that coming across Wagang Army is not a problem, the most scary thing is coming across deserting government troops or perhaps defeated troops. That would be more disastrous than coming across a tiger or wolves.”

Recalling those killing and burning defeated army they had met, Xu Ziling sighed.

Kou Zhong suddenly grew excited; he whispered, “Now the world [tian xia] is becoming more and more chaotic. I heard a man who was originally a defender officer of Jincheng county magistrate called Xue Ju, has raised an army to revolt, and has proclaimed himself Xi Qin Bawang [hegemonic prince of western Qin (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xue_Ju)]. He wanted to imitate Qin Shihuang [the first emperor of China] in unifying the world. Right now he has taken Tianshui [prefecture, Gansu], and wanted to establish it as his capital. I’ll say there is nothing exceptional about this Xue Ju. If it were me, I wouldn’t be so foolish to impatiently declare myself an emperor. It clearly shows that he looks down upon the other militias, and hence has become the target of multitude of arrows.”

“Where is Tianshui?” Xu Ziling asked.

Immensely proud of himself, Kou Zhong replied, “Tianshui is outside Qinling [mountain range, Shaanxi, between Guanzhong plain and Han River], west of the Capital; no wonder you did not know.”

Assuming the air of an analyst, he said, “If not for Wagang Army holding up the main forces at the Capital and the Eastern Capital, perhaps Xue Ju would not dare to revolt. Other than him, there is also a fellow called Li Gui who also raises an army at Wuwei [also in Gansu], and bestowed himself the title of Da Liang Wang [king of the great Liang]. In just several short months there are two more militias; it seems to me the Sui dynasty’s days are numbered.”

He added, “In my opinion, like Li Dage said, other than Dou Jiande, Li Mi, Wang Bo and our ol’ Die, I am afraid other people would not amount to much.”

Xu Ziling laughed and said, “Are you forgetting Li guy?”

Kou Zhong’s thick face turned red; he said, “Honestly, I do not want to remember that Li guy.”

At that moment, flustered and exasperated, the inn-worker in charge of the stable ran toward the two boys’ table; he said in panic, “Two Shaoye, not good! Some people are going to steal your horse.”

Immediately Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling’s countenance changed.

By the time the two boys rushed toward the stable at the inn courtyard, Bai’er, Hui’er, and about a dozen other horses were led out of the stable by about a dozen soldiers; they were about to leave.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling pounced forward to block the exit and shouted at them to stop. Obviously the soldiers have never expected that someone would be so brazen like this, they all shouted back at the two boys, two of the soldiers even drew the saber hanging on their waists.

Kou Zhong whispered to Xu Ziling, “Grab the horse, I’ll deal with the people. Just watch Laozi’s imposing manner!”

There was a saber flash, one soldier’s broadsword chopped down on Kou Zhong’s neck; the soldier did not have any care in the world whether he would kill an innocent civilian or not.

Kou Zhong’s eyes gleamed with sharp rays, his countenance turned incomparably cold, just like Ba Fenghan, as he watched the incoming momentum. Fast as lightning his right hand shot out, unexpectedly he grabbed the saber’s hilt, while down below his leg also flew out as fast as lightning.

The soldier screamed as he met Kou Zhong’s foot and was thrown about a zhang away, and crashed against another soldier. The two soldiers rolled around together in a jumble, and looked extremely miserable.

The other soldiers could only stare blankly; they started to realize that they have met martial art experts.

But Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling actually looked at each other; they both did not expect Kou Zhong's kick would be that formidable.

Kou Zhong tossed the saber in his hand into the air, and when it fell down, he caught it by the handle. Imitating Ba Fenghan, he held it horizontally across his chest. With a disdain look on his face he assumed a heroic air and coldly said, "You are officers and soldiers, yet you openly rob commoners' horses; are you tired of living?"

The soldiers were overwhelmed by his imposing manner; unexpectedly no one dared to make a move.

A big man that looked like their leader took a step forward and angrily shouted, "We are under the General's order to collect horses. Kid, you dare to disobey the imperial decree, you are the one who is tired of living. Still have not gotten lost?"

Kou Zhong himself was wanted by the Emperor, how could he give any thought to this kind of emperor's order that oppressed common people? Just now he made a move and was immediately triumphant, his excitement soared. He took two steps forward until the distance between he and the leader was only about a zhang. The entire power of his body was concentrated on the blade of the saber, while at the same time he quickly sent out the true qi in his body.

A stream of biting cold saber qi immediately appeared from the saber blade. The most extraordinary thing was that the entire saber seemed to it up.

More than a dozen soldiers' countenances changed at the same time. The soldiers' leader bore the brunt. He was pushed by the surge of saber qi two steps back.

Kou Zhong did not expect he could really have this kind of power. Immediately he reverted back to his old self, the saber qi vanished.

The leader still thought that just now it was his own illusion. Also, thinking that the two boys were merely young people, he cried his order, a dozen or so soldiers shouted and raised their weapons high as they charged toward the two boys.

Kou Zhong was afraid that because Xu Ziling had no weapon, he would suffer losses. Therefore, with a shout he charged first and drew a semi-circle with his saber. The enemy's sabers that were caught in the circle, four out of six left the hands and were flung aside, the other two were twisted on the wrist, and felt a shocking pain on the palm of their hands that they backed off.

By this time Xu Ziling rushed toward Bai'er and Hui'er, and beat the two soldiers leading the horses until they fell on the ground like a pair of gourds; while also snatched a saber from them.

Like lightning Kou Zhong's saber hacked and chopped, instantly one soldier got hit and fell to the ground. With a big laugh he said, "Next year today will be the anniversary of your, these thief soldiers' death. Just consider meeting us as your bad luck."

Hearing that he was going to kill them, the soldiers who had not been injured immediately scattered like birds and beasts; those who had been injured had no choice but to crawl and roll to get away.

Stroking the saber's blade Kou Zhong sighed and said, "Soldiers as small as a mouse, only know how to bully common people around. No wonder that so many people are forced to rebel."

Xu Ziling came over, leading the horses along. He laughed bitterly and said, "If we don't slip away right now, when the enemy's troops are coming back, next year today will be the anniversary of our death."

Waving the long saber in their hands, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling urged their horses to charge directly toward the city gate.

Apparently the soldiers guarding the gate have not received the news. Caught

unprepared, five or six soldiers were knocked down. By the time they wanted to pursue, the two boys have already disappeared behind the cloud of dust.

The two boys were in high spirit. Although they felt a little distressed because they had to abandon their carriage along with their personal belongings, but momentarily the feeling of venting their anger and the pride in their heart trumped it all.

After galloping for twenty, thirty li, it was already evening, the two boys spent the night in the open by the roadside.

Kou Zhong hunted a pheasant and came back. Xu Ziling already gathered enough dry branches and sticks to make fire to roast the pheasant. Sniffing the aroma, the two boys felt perfectly content.

With concern in his eyes, Kou Zhong shot a glance toward the horses, which were grazing on the hillside nearby. He sighed and said, "It's hard to imagine that two poor wretched boys like us would finally own two good horses. But I always say that that day will eventually come."

Xu Ziling said, "You, this guy, have imposing manner at the beginning, but no power at the end. At the start you radiated the air of a martial art master, just by saber qi you forced that soldiers' captain to recoil in panic, but then your power did not continue on. A martial art master like you really shame our school."

Kou Zhong smiled sheepishly and said, "Next time I won't be like that, I know that mental cultivation is the most important. During combat we must be absolutely calm, just like the moon in the well. Any mood swings will make a master [orig. gao shou – high hand] turns into a low hand."

"That is easy to say, difficult to achieve," Xu Ziling said, "For example, if you see me injured by the enemy, would you still be able to maintain essence, qi and spirit in that kind of 'moon in the well' state?"

Kou Zhong asked himself, but in the end he admitted that it was impossible. Distressed, he said, "But that fellow Ba Fenghan seems to have innate ability to be that kind of person. We are actually passionate persons. I wonder if there is

any way toughen up and become people with iron-and-stone aspiration?”

Xu Ziling knitted his brows, deep in thought for a moment, before speaking in heavy tone, “Looks like only during a life and death, decisive battle that we are able to pursue understanding. One day we do not achieve this state, one day we cannot boast ourselves as martial art masters.”

Kou Zhong excitedly said, “But we already know what it is all about. After training hard in the woodshed for those few days, the true qi in my body is a lot more decent than before, only ... huh?”

Alarm went off in the two boys’ head at the same time. They looked at the horses, and as soon as they did that, they felt the corners of their eyes were about to split; they pulled out their sabers and sprang up.

They saw a very big man, as magnificent as a mountain, his loose hair draped over his shoulders, and he wore yellow clothes. As if without any strength at all his hands separately patted lightly on Hui’er and Bai’er’s heads. Immediately a terrible sound of breaking bones was heard from the pathetic two boys’ beloved mounts; without uttering any noise the horses collapsed to the ground, dead, and the bodies slipped down toward the foot of the hill.

Kou Zhong let out an earth-shattering sorrowful cry. He was about to charge when Xu Ziling suddenly thundered, “Moon in the water!”

Kou Zhong’s tiger body shook violently; suddenly he halted.

With feet not touching the ground, the man floated down hill, to about a zhang away from the two boys, before stopping and standing loftily.

This man’s face looked like bronze, he had thick eyebrows and big eyes, and had a big wart right in the middle of his forehead, just like a one-horn monster; a totally terrifying freak.

His hands and feet were thicker than average person, giving the impression that he had infinite power.

This moment his pair of huge eyes was flickering with internal energy as he fiercely sizing up the two boys. At last his eyes fell on the two boys' sabers that were pointing at him.

"You think you are fit to fight with me, Yuwen Wudi?" he said with a cold snort. [Wudi means peerless, the title of this chapter.]

Reminded by Xu Ziling earlier, Kou Zhong understood that this was the critical moment; gradually he calmed down and said in low voice, "Fit or unfit, only after fighting will we be able to see clearly."

With a calmness that even surprised Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling spoke nonchalantly, "I wonder how shameless your Die and Niang were to give you such a boastful name?"

A furious look flitted across Yuwen Wudi's eyes. His hand reached behind his back to fetch a lance; immediately a surge of cold, harsh murderous aura shot out from him.

Right this moment, the two boys' spirit entered the moon-in-the-water realm; at the same time they also emitted saber qi. By joining their power, they were able to resist this dreadful opponent.

An astounded expression swept past Yuwen Wudi's face. His hand brandished the lance, his feet powerfully surged forward three steps. Unleashing the full power of his lance, it turned into thousands lance shadows, attacking the two boys like the tidal waves of the Great River or Yellow River.

The circulation of true qi in Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's body was at its peak, their senses were amplified many times over; they were able to sense clearly that the opponent's lance shadows were entirely empty, only one lance targeting Xu Ziling's throat was real.

Kou Zhong let out a wild roar, but his countenance was as clear as water as he abruptly charged forward and moved his saber in a chopping motion, aiming Yuwen Wudi's left shoulder. The true qi was transferred by the saber, producing

a sharp whistle as it split the air; the momentum was extremely astonishing.

Xu Ziling's mind was also very sharp, it was even clearer than when he usually practiced; he was able to see clearly the incoming lance's power, speed and angle. Without the slightest hesitation he bent his knees in a horse stance, while his saber also made a hacking motion.

Fast as a lightning the opponent slid horizontally aside. Not only to evade Kou Zhong's saber, he also altered the lance's speed and angle, so that it now threatened Xu Ziling's right flank.

Xu Ziling kept his original style unchanged, except he modified the angle slightly. 'Qiang!' the saber clashed with the tip of the lance.

Force and qi collided with each other.

Xu Ziling let out a muffled grunt; he was jolted by the opponent's thousand-lightning-strike like force that his entire body was thrown backward.

Yuwen Wudi also felt discomfort. He felt that this kid's true qi that was transmitted via the saber's blade was incomparably strange. It felt like it was not there, but it also felt burning hot. When it collided with his own true qi, it changed into gossamer-like thin threads, like an arrow or a dart shooting straight into his meridians, forcing its way deep into his body. He could not stop his body from recoiling half a step back.

He was numbered among the few martial art experts within the Yuwen Clan. Excluding their Clan Master Yuwen Shang, in terms of martial art skill, he was preceded only by Yuwen Huaji, Yuwen Chengdu, and Yuwen Shi, three men. Who would have thought that even after going all-out, not only he failed to kill Xu Ziling, he was pushed back half a step instead. If this matter leaked out, his fame for fighting prowess would suffer great damage; automatically his murderous intention was greatly aroused.

After receiving report from his men that Kou and Xu, two boys, were seen inside Wagang City, highly confident of his own martial art prowess, he went alone on a hunting mission. He already made up his mind to kill one of the two

boys first, and then force the other one to hand over the account book.

Actually, the one climbing up the ship and stealing the account book that night was precisely Yuwen Chengdu. Suffering a major setback, upon returning he did not dare to tell the truth. He only said that the two boys were one step ahead of him and have stolen the account book first; hence it gave birth to contempt toward the two boys in Yuwen Wudi's heart. Only this moment did he realize that these two boys were really not simple.

Kou Zhong instinctively knew that Xu Ziling would not die; however, if he failed to occupy Yuwen Wudi, Xu Ziling's death would be guaranteed. Therefore, not daring to hesitate, he unleashed the full power of the 'Ruler Overlooking the World', the most aggressive style of the 'Bloody Battle Ten Styles'. The saber and the person blended together into one, as he charged into another circle of lance shadows drawn by Yuwen Wudi.

The very moment Xu Ziling was flying in the air and falling down, he knew that it was crucial for him to keep the burning hot true qi circulating within his body. As soon as he touched the ground, like a spring he bounced back, and saw that about two zhang away, Kou Zhong was surrounded by Yuwen Wudi's lance shadows, producing a continuous ringing of saber and lance clashing against each other. Hastily Xu Ziling charged toward the two men.

Actually, Yuwen Wudi was groaning inwardly, because he had secretly suffered a loss.

What happened was that he had used the wrong energy. When receiving Kou Zhong's first saber attack, he thought Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling trained using the same method, thereupon he decided to meet the attack head-on by sending out a hundred percent Yang energy, to deal with what he thought was a burning hot Yang energy.

Who would have thought that as the saber and lance collided, a stream of incomparably strange and cold Yin energy surged into his body via Kou Zhong's blade?

By nature, Yin and Yang energy overcome each other. Caught off guard, Yuwen

Wudi did not have enough time to protect himself, and thus several meridians in his body were injured. Although at the last moment he managed to turn the situation around, his strength has been greatly reduced, plus Kou Zhong continuously sending out attack after attack with his saber, momentarily he was unable to extricate himself.

It was at this moment that Xu Ziling, totally unharmed, came to join the fray.

Yuwen Wudi lost his confidence, because originally he was confident that if Xu Ziling did not die, he would be, at the very least, heavily injured. Who would have thought that Xu Ziling appeared to come out unscathed? How could he not be aghast and desperate?

However, he was, after all, a first-class martial art master, his mind remained unflustered. With a wild roar he broadened the momentum of his lance to surround Xu Ziling as well. This time he held nothing back; his main intention was to kill these two boys as quickly as possible. Whether he could obtain the account book or not, it has become secondary.

Every time saber and lance collided, it produced a nice and crisp ring, multiplying the viciousness of this battle several folds.

The longer they fought, the more Yuwen Wudi felt the battle grew increasingly strenuous. He felt that he was at his wits' end to deal with the opponents' cold and hot, yin and yang attack. Not only that, he also felt that the two boys' true qi was broad and deep, mysterious and inscrutable; plus they seemed to have inexhaustible capacity that enabled them to go on forever.

In reality, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had also reached the 'mountain and river exhausted' condition. The opponent's lance appeared to continue its violent offensive indefinitely, making them felt as if they were under thousand-catty pressure, little by little sapping down their willpower.

For the two boys, this battle was the biggest challenge and the heaviest physical exercise they ever had since their debut. Supposing they were able to survive this hurdle without dying, it would instantly propel them into the rank of first-class martial art master list. In this case, Yuwen Wudi actually acted as their

mentor, who intimidated them with death for a total work-out.

Just as the two boys were about to fall apart, the lance's momentum suddenly slowed down.

Yuwen Wudi's spirit was greatly shaken. He knew that he was burdened with wounded meridians, so eventually he started to show some gaps in his offense. While he was groaning at the unfavorable turn of events, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's momentum immediately soared.

Although unwilling, Yuwen Wudi knew that if he did not leave now, he could forget about escaping alive. Thereupon he abruptly increased his true qi while both hands moved toward the middle of the lance's pole. Exercising his amazing footwork, the lance's head and the end of the pole accurately struck the blades of the two boys' sabers simultaneously, and then he flew backward to retreat.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling drew their qi, the blades in their hands turned into a long rainbow, striking toward Yuwen Wudi.

This martial art master from the Yuwen Clan groaned in pain; carrying two streams of blood splashing into the air, in the blink of an eye he vanished into the dark mountain forest.

Immediately Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling dropped down on their knees, using their sabers to prop themselves up.

This victory was indeed obtained through extreme danger; but in the end they managed to snatch their two little lives back.

Book 4 Chapter 6 – Meeting Susu Again

The fall of Xingyang was actually one of the turning points related to the rise and fall of the Great Sui; moreover, it was the starting point of Li Mi's contention to gain control of the world [tian xia].

For this great undertaking, for the last twelve years Li Mi has been joining Wagang Army. This man was very resourceful; he had great aspiration, and knew how to exploit the potential of Wagang Army and Zhai Rang like the sun in the middle of the sky. Also, relying on his superior martial art skill, he subdued smaller militias and different powers nearby, and hence exponentially enhanced the power of the Wagang Army. At the same time, he was able to see clearly that the river section on which they had always been relying on to transport military supplies was in fact the Achilles heel in the development of the Wagang Army, because it was insufficient to supply the necessities.

Therefore, he made a suggestion to Zhai Rang, "Take Xingyang first, rest the troops, build storehouse. When the troops and horses are satisfied, we will have advantage in our fight against others."

Just by this insight, it could clearly be seen that Li Mi's power, talent, greatness and resourcefulness were superior to Zhai Rang's.

If they were able to exercise control over Xingyang and the surrounding area, they could solve the long-term food supply problem, further expanded their influence, posed a direct threat to the Eastern Capital Luoyang, and affected the military affair relations between the Capital, Luoyang and Jiangdu, three strategic cities.

After gaining Zhai Rang's approval, in the tenth month of the same year,

Wagang Army launched a large-scale military operation. They took the counties around Xingyang first before advancing toward Xingyang City.

Yang Guang valued this area very much, hence he dispatched Zhang Xutuo, who, at that time, was a top rank valiant general who suppressed the twelve counties along Henan road, to defend Xingyang, leading twenty-thousand elite troops to meet the enemy head-on.

Whether in imperial court or in Wulin, this man had famous reputation; his skill 'Wild Wind Spear Technique' was the de facto number one spear technique of the present age. His character was arrogant and conceited; naturally he looked down upon Li Mi, whose reputation was only so-so.

Previously, each time Wagang Army met Zhang Xutuo, they were always defeated really bad that they ran away abandoning their armors and throwing away their spears; therefore, Zhai Rang feared him like a tiger.

Hearing that the attacking enemy was this nemesis, he immediately wanted to retreat, saying, "This man is proficient in the art of war, his spear skill matchless; moreover, his generals Luo Shixin, Qin Shubao, are brave and good at fighting. We'd better evading the point of his spear for the time being, and draw a future plan."

All the rest of his subordinates' courage grew cold, everybody agreed; only Li Mi stood his ground against the opinion of the masses. He asked Zhai Rang to take command of the main force to confront the enemy head-on, while he, leading four capable generals Wang Bodang, Zu Junyan, Shen Luoyan, and Xu Shiji, took command of about a thousand or so martial art experts to set an ambush in the jungle north of Dahai Temple.

When the two main forces met, as expected, little by little Zhai Rang's main force was losing, and Zhang Xutuo's forces pursued them for about ten li, until they came to the area north of Dahai Temple. Li Mi went into action, his troops launched a surprise attack from behind Zhang's forces. Zhai Rang joined the battle by turning around and attacked from the front. Under this converging attack Zhang's forces suffered heavy casualties. Li Mi even went into action personally and killed Zhang Xutuo.

This battle catapulted Li Mi's fame throughout the world, he became the most prestigious figure within the Wagang Army, even above their Big Boss Zhai Rang.

This great victory established the Wagang Army's foundation, it also inflicted serious damage to Sui Army's prestige.

Under this kind of situation, Zhai Rang had no choice but to let Li Mi led an army, which was known as the Duke of Pushan's Battalion.

Li Mi was of noble birth, his previous generation was bestowed a title, hence he inherited the nobility title Duke of Pushan, and decided to use this name.

Li Mi had great ambitions; already obtained Xingyang, he aimed to get Xingluo Warehouse. This warehouse was the Sui Dynasty's biggest granary, which was extremely important to Yang Guang, so he sent brave warrior general Liu Wengong and his twenty-five thousand strong cavalry advancing from the Eastern Capital Luoyang in an attempt to reverse the situation.

Yang Guang also dispatched Pei Renji from Tiger Prison to attack Wagang Army from behind, hoping that with these two big forces they could curb Li Mi.

At the same time, Yang Guang even dispatched his competent subordinate Wang Shichong to Luoyang to have direct confrontation with Li Mi.

When Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong arrived in Xingyang, the opposing forces were in deadlocked situation, anything could happen at any moment.

After repelling Yuwen Wudi, the two boys' confidence increased sharply. Also because of this real combat experience where they were facing deathly danger yet came out alive, during martial art training they no longer blindly charging blindly striking like before; therefore, during these past twenty days or so of traveling, the two boys' spirit and skill have advanced by leaps and bounds.

If someone who knew them back in Yangzhou came across them at this moment, they would certainly be astonished by the change.

Xu Ziling looked even more scholarly elegant and unconventional. His shoulders broad his legs long, his physique stood straight like the pole of a spear. Under his wide forehead a pair of tiger-eyes flickered with divine light, filled with intimidating charisma. Although he had just turned nineteen, he had the impression of a grownup.

On the other hand, Kou Zhong's domineering aura was growing by day. Although he was about a cun shorter than Xu Ziling, yet he was already half a head taller than average men. Due to his especially thick shoulders and back, his physique looked even more imposing.

If Xu Ziling was elegant, then Kou Zhong was heroic.

Rarer still, Kou Zhong often assumed a cynical look; but with his forceful and domineering aura, the combination produced a more neutral look, a style that was unique to him.

However, the two boys were still unaware that they had entered the rank of martial art masters; when going into the city they were still nervous, acting like if anything happened, they were ready to escape without a trace.

At this time, the security around the city gate was extremely tight, the two boys have just stepped foot over the gate, immediately they were interrogated by Wagang troops wearing blue warrior outfit. As the leader saw that they were wearing long sabers and their unusually imposing manner, he questioned their family and school background, the purpose of their visit, and so on.

Kou Zhong cooked up some nonsense, but the captain was still not satisfied; he asked, "Everybody coming in and out of the city must obtain a pass signed and issued by Zu Junshi. Looking at you, I don't believe you are lawbreakers, but military order cannot be disobeyed; forgive me for not allowing you to pass."

Since the captain polite and courteous, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had good impression on him. Xu Ziling calmly said, "Not to conceal anything, this time we came here to look for our close friend, Jiejie Susu; she is your ... hey! Your Da Longtou's [lit. big dragon head, Big Boss] missing beloved daughter's maid. If you don't believe me, you may find her and ask, then you'll know."

The captain frowned and said, "Don't speak nonsense, Big Miss returned from her tour outside last month; what do you mean 'missing'?"

Instantly Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were stunned; they were completely at a loss. At the abandoned village that day, they saw it with their own eyes how Zhai Rang was struck by the strange man who conspired with Zu Junyan; how did Susu's Miss suddenly return safe and sound?

However, the captain did not suspect them; he said, "I also know Su Jie; after she was separated from Miss in Jiangbei, she returned here. It was I who personally escorted her back to Da Longtou's mansion. How about this: take off your saber first, let me send people to notify her."

After a short pause, he continued, "What are your names?"

Kou Zhong gratefully replied, "Please just tell her that Xiao Zhong and Xiao Ling came to look for her." He exchanged a glance with Xu Ziling. Because Susu was safe, they were quite excited.

The captain ordered his men to take the two boys to wait in the officers' hall near the city gate, and then he sent another man to ride a horse and gallop away to notify Susu.

The two boys were seated in a small stone room, the door was made of steel, obviously it was a small prison room.

Kou Zhong did not understand, "Clearly Zhai Rang was struck and injured by that strange man, how did the daughter get rescued?"

Xu Ziling replied with a wry smile, "Do you expect me to have the answer? Ay! The city defense is this tight, and every single one of the Wagang troops looked like they have fought a couple of times. Even if Susu Jiejie is willing to come with us, we won't have the ability to take her away."

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Don't be that pessimistic! The matter depends

on the individual, we can always find ways; for example, we can try to steal his mother's two passes. Hey! Who would have thought that the one who issue and sign the passes is Zu Junyan; himself is a traitor. Do you want to expose him to Zhai Rang?"

"How far can it get us?" Xu Ziling replied, "Right now I am most afraid to come across Shen Luoyan, that b1tch and her subordinates who have fought against us. If that happens, we will be in big trouble."

However, Kou Zhong was very optimistic; very pleased with himself, he said, "Shen Poniang [reminder: b1tch] is Li Mi's Pretty Junshi, naturally she follows the troops going to war. The master has something to do, the skulk of foxes and pack of dogs under him have no choice but to wait upon him on his side. I am not worried."

And then he added, "Wagang troops seem to behave a lot better than Ol' Die's Jiang Huai [River Huai] troops; were it not for we have other plan, joining Wagang Army does not seem to be a bad idea!"

Xu Ziling snorted, but did not answer him; he closed his eyes and practiced his internal energy.

These days, whether walking, sitting or lying down, the two boys were hard at work cultivating their internal energy. Kou Zhong was originally not a hardworking person, but after their fight against Yuwen Wudi, he knew that practicing martial art was the only way he could save his life; hence he had to be proactive in training hard, so that his motivation now did not fall short compared to Xu Ziling's.

Very quickly they had already entered the extremely calm state where people who train martial art difficult to seek even in their dreams. The true qi in their body surged, it was flowing endlessly.

In this no-consciousness no-feeling state, time passed quietly.

Suddenly the door was pushed open. The two boys reacted instantly; they both opened their eyes and looked toward the door.

The quietness did not diminish much, but the end result was the beautiful Susu rushed in, carrying a whiff of fragrant wind around her, toward the two boys who had just sprang up from their seated position, and embraced them.

The three people cried and laughed, and laughed and cried, but there was not even half a sentence spoken.

However, because there was an outsider nearby, Susu reluctantly let the two boys go. With hot tears rolling down her face she said, "I thought I'd never see you anymore! Ay!" Unable to control her emotion, she threw herself into the two boys' embrace again, while weeping uncontrollably, revealing her true feeling.

The captain of the guard outside the door saw the red-hot brother-sister emotion in them, his heart was touched; lightly he closed the door to let the three freely talk about what happened to them after they parted.

Kou Zhong stroked Susu's collar, seeing she appeared to be pear blossom soaked in rain, his heart ached. "Susu Jie must not cry," he said, "You ought to laugh."

Holding her fragrant shoulders, Xu Ziling said, "Did Susu Jie receive wrong treatment here?"

Still in tears, Susu shook her head and said, "No! Miss is still treating me very well! Ay! You two boys have grown tall and strong; there must be a lot of girls fall for you."

Kou Zhong awkwardly replied, "As it turns out, quite the opposite is true. Every time we met beautiful women, other than Susu Jie, if not shouting 'beat them', then they would shout 'kill them'. That's why we had no choice but to come looking for you, Susu Jie."

Susu was accustomed to crack jokes with them; just like clear sky after the rain, "Pft!" she burst into tender laugh as she said, "You are still the same. Ay! You don't know how much tears other has shed for you, two brothers."

Wanting to amuse her, Xu Ziling pretended to be puzzled, "That's strange! How come the more Susu Jie cried, the more beautiful your eyes become?"

Susu laughed while leaning on the two boys' shoulders.

The love between these brothers and sister was genuine; although they could not avoid suspicions, there was no carnal desire between men and women, not the slightest bit.

Kou Zhong whispered on her small ear, "What about Li Dage?"

Susu's tender body shook; lifting up her tear-stained pretty face, she said, "After he escorted me back here, he went to the Eastern Capital."

Looking at her expression, Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong knew that this good sister's feeling toward Li Jing has rooted deep in her heart.

Xu Ziling asked with a frown, "He didn't ask you to come along?"

Susu bowed her head and said softly, "It was me who refuse to go with him. He is a real man and true hero, naturally he ought to take advantage of his young age to make a break through on his own career."

The two boys felt deep veneration for her.

Kou Zhong seized the chance to say, "Although the two of us are real men, we are simply not true heroes; Susu Jie please come with us."

Susu was shaken, "I still need to wait upon Miss," she said.

Xu Ziling urged her, "If you stay, you might lose your life; we saw it with our own eyes how Zu Junyan conspired with outsiders to injure your Laoye [old master]."

Susu was stunned, "Nonsense!" she said, "Laoye is fine, how could you say he is injured?"

Kou Zhong was taken aback, "Wasn't your Miss captured by the enemy?" he asked.

"There is no such thing!" Susu replied.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other; they were dumbstruck.

Xu Ziling changed direction; he asked, "Didn't your Miss go missing for a short period of time, and then she suddenly came back?"

Susu answered, "When I came back, Miss was still traveling outside and came back home only last month. It was Zu Junshi who personally escorted her back."

Kou Zhong slapped his thigh, "This Zu Junyan is very crafty; be a good man, be a bad man, he did all."

Thereupon Xu Ziling narrated their encounter at the abandoned village. Listening to him, Susu's countenance changed continuously; finally she said with determination, "I must tell this to Miss, and then let her inform Laoye. Ay! Now that you mention it, I remember something. When Miss came back, she was a lot thinner than before; also, it's just so not like her to scold us a lot."

"What?" Kou Zhong's voice broke, "Does she like to scold people? Why did you say she is treating you very well?"

Susu earnestly said, "Her temper is not good, but her character is very good. I served her for many years, I have the clearest understanding." And then she grabbed the two boys' arms and shook them, imploring them, "For Jiejie's sake, would you help Miss and Laoye just this one time? With someone like Zu Junyan in the army, sooner or later it will lead to disaster. If you are telling the truth, Laoye will definitely believe you!"

"How could he not believe us?" Kou Zhong said, "Otherwise, how could we

know this much details?”

“It depends on whether we can speak directly to Zhai Laoye,” Xu Ziling surmised.

Seeing the two boys were persuaded, Susu was greatly delighted, “Whether you can speak directly to Laoye, it will be entirely up to Miss,” she said, “Maybe you can convince her.”

“There’s no time to lose,” Kou Zhong said, “We’ll have to see Miss immediately!”

Susu’s pretty face blushed, “It will also up to Miss,” she said, “Just wait here patiently for a while. Because even if Miss nods her head, we still need to get formal approval before you can stay in the city.”

The two boys had no choice but to look at each other with a wry smile.

Who would have thought that waiting until deep into the night, there was still no news? Fortunately there were enough tea and food. The two boys might as well practice their martial art, so that they would not feel the bitterness of ‘imprisonment’.

When Xu Ziling woke up the next morning, he saw Kou Zhong was sitting on a chair, staring blankly with face deathly pale. Xu Ziling was greatly shocked, “What happened?” he asked.

Scowling miserably, Kou Zhong replied, “I don’t know whether it was fire deviation during practice, but I can’t draw true qi from Tianling acupoint anymore.”

Aghast, Xu Ziling did quick self-examination, and his countenance immediately changed, “I am the same thing; could it be that someone put poison in our food?”

Kou Zhong moaned miserably, “Looks like it’s something like ‘san gong wan’

[scattering energy pill]. Who would want to harm us like this?”

Xu Ziling closed his eyes and circulated his qi, suddenly he felt his dantian [a point two inches below the navel where the qi resides] growing hot; the true qi was gradually condensing again. Opening his eyes, he happily said, “Try again, I seem to be able to gather my qi.”

The two boys sat on chairs, closed their eyes and circulated their energy. Half a day later their skin emitted hot perspiration, which smell a little bit like medicine.

They had never imagined that they would become this formidable; unexpectedly they could even discharge the poison from their body. While they were rejoicing inwardly, the iron door opened.

The instant the two boys heard the lock, they immediately wiped the perspiration from their head and face, exchanged an eye signal, and pretended to look dejected, but inwardly they were in full alert.

The incoming person was, surprisingly, the one with beauty like a fairy, but the heart as poisonous as snakes and scorpions, Shen Luoyan. She was smiling coquettishly as she came in and walked over to the two boys. Bowing with cupped fist she said, “Two Gongzi, how are you?”

Kou Zhong took a furtive look behind her; seeing there was only someone who looked like a city gate guard, he was relieved.

“Why are you harming us?” he asked hatefully, “If you are a heroine[1], come and have a fair fight with us.”

With flowery face and tender voice Shen Luoyan said, “I only want you to be a bit quieter! However, one day I don’t give you the antidote, two Gongzi may forget being as naughty and active as before. But you must not blame me, Jiejie only received Duke Mi’s order, we must guard against anybody suspicious, that’s all.” [Translator’s note: in this entire conversation, she was referring herself as ‘renjia’, basically means ‘other people’.]

Xu Ziling angrily said, “Don’t you know that we are you Da Longtou’s precious daughter’s honored guests?”

Calm and unfazed by the accusation, Shen Luoyan said, “Naturally I do. Right now the city of Xingyang has become my, this bad woman, responsibility to administer. Were it not for reading the file that Zhai Jiao girl submitted to apply for pass you you, I would not have known that two Gongzi have honored us with your presence.”

Kou Zhong dejectedly said, “Are you really dying to get married? Alright, let me take you, beautiful b1tch as my wife!”

Shen Luoyan’s beautiful eyes flickered with murderous intent, which quickly died down. After carefully sizing up Kou Zhong for half a day, also examined Xu Ziling carefully, she smiled and said, “Long time no see, you have made a little bit of progress, but it will still be difficult for me, Shen Luoyan, to have you in my eyes. You are very good at adapting to circumstances, if you are willing to obediently tell me the whereabouts of the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’, I will let you go immediately. Otherwise, I will have to kill you, once for all, so that no one will be kept in suspense.”

Xu Ziling forced a laughter and said, “I thought you were a bit more special; in the end it is still greed at play.”

Shen Luoyan sighed silently.

The two boys knew that the time she was going to make her move was at hand; they quickly focused their mind and spirit in full alert.

Right this moment, a feminine voice scolded from outside the room, “Who dares to stop me, Zhai Jiao?”

Shen Luoyan’s countenance changed slightly. It looked like she was going to make her move to kill the two boys, but then she immediately withdrew to the side.

Someone stormed in, a woman, who was thick and solid like men, who was completely different from the image of the 'Miss' that the two boys had in mind, who was wearing colorful clothes, suddenly appeared in the room, followed by indignant-looking Susu.

Shen Luoyan saluted and said, "Good morning Miss!"

Zhao Jiao, who did not look delicate at all ['jiao' means tender/delicate/frail], glowered at her with her round, copper-bell like eyes. "Shen Junshi still considers me Miss?" she said, "I told you yesterday that I want to see these two boys; why are you still unwilling to let them go until this morning?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling turned as dumb as wooden chicken; they stared blankly at this 'Miss', who did not have the slightest 'womanly flavor'.

Actually, she could be considered as having regular features; only her cheekbones were too high and round, her hair thick and her eyebrows coarse, her waist straight and her body sturdy, so that although she was wearing makeups, she looked nondescript [orig. neither fish nor fowl], enough to give a man who look at her nausea.

On the outside, Shen Luoyan appeared did not dare to defy her. Smiling apologetically, she said, "As per our usual practice, Luoyan only wanted to cross-examine them! Miss may take them right now, the pass will be delivered to Miss later."

This time around the two boys were greatly amazed. How could Shen Luoyan be this agreeable?

Zhai Jiao maintained her reputation; she barked her order at the two boys, "You, these two slaves, have not quickly crawled out to follow me, do you want to be locked up in here forever?"

Looking at the smirking Shen Luoyan, and the apologetic and pleading expression on their good older sister Susu's face, what could the two boys say? Without any choice they smiled wryly and 'crawled' out of the room.

They still heard Shen Luoyan's voice giving them warning, "Don't ever say that I drugged you, I would never admit it; I would kill you instead."

[1] Hero – heroine. Orig. Chinese only have word for hero, 'ying xiong', ying – brave, xiong – male, could be used both for humans and animals. Here Kou Zhong said 'ying ci', ci – female, counterpart of 'xiong'.

Book 4 Chapter 7 – Learning The Art Of Taking Refuge

The big boss' mansion was situated in the center of Xingyang's inner city. Previously it was the official residence of the governor in charge of the city. After it fell into Zhai Rang's hands, he built extension to the building. The originally magnificent mansion house now became even more spectacular.

Xingyang was located south of the stream crossing the Grand Canal, along the canal connecting the land west of the Yellow River, passing Hulao [lit. Tiger Cage] and Yanshi, two cities, and continued on to the Eastern Capital Luoyang, comprising of several major water ways; therefore, Wagang Army was able to grow their roots and establish their foundation here, posing a significant threat to the Sui dynasty.

If the Eastern Capital fell, not only it would cut off the waterway link between the west side of the Capital and the East, psychologically the victor would also be able to leap to the throne over the numerous militias and overlords all over the world [tian xia, *i.e.* China].

Due to its strategic geographical position, Xingyang has become the transit center of Yellow River's Grand Canal and other rivers, also an unavoidable fast horse relay station of past dynasties; for this reason, ever since Spring and Autumn, the Warring States period, it has been exceptionally thriving. In term of east-west waterborne transport center, its importance was second only to Luoyang.

Even in this chaotic time of war, Xingyang remained unusually prosperous. Along the street section from the southern gate to the Big Boss Mansion, grain

retailers, oil mill, grocery stores and restaurants stood in great numbers, their doors were interlinking with each other.

The streets were exceptionally wide and could accommodate ten horses running side by side; the exact ambience of big town, big city.

Xingyang and the nearby Xingze along the Grand Canal, one was primary, the other one secondary; these two cities were practically one.

If Xingze's pier were of the same scale as Xingyang, it would also become the shipping and distribution center, plus Xingyang was transit center for southern ships and northern horses, as well as the goods shipped between the River Wei and the Grand Canal.

Both places were located along a major route, in between was a very long official road, the houses and stores on either side of the road were linked together, became a major feature of this city.

From time to time, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling saw towering temples and pagodas, tall buildings and big houses. They mused that no wonder Wagang Army wanted to seize this big city to be their base of operation.

After they arrived at the big boss mansion, Susu led them to have a bath and change their clothes; she also repeatedly urged them to abide by the rules before taking them to the hall of Zhai Jiao's lady chamber to see this arrogant Miss.

The two boys saw the reverent and respectful expression on Susu's face, as she bowed humbly and complied fully with the courtesy, and stood with both hands hung down in front of the big miss of the Zhai family who was sitting on the host seat on a raised pedestal; just like a prisoner under interrogation.

After barking her order to the servant girls and old servants on her left and right to withdraw, which included even Susu, Zhao Jiao stared coldly at the two boys for quite a while, without any intention of asking them to sit down at all.

While the two boys were cursing her in their heart, Zhao Jiao said, “Tell me again.”

Kou Zhong sighed inwardly and took a deep breath, and then he vividly narrated what happened that day to her. Afterwards he asked, “I wonder where Miss was at that time?”

Zhai Jiao barked with her hoarse voice, “Right now I am asking you, or are you asking me?”

Kou Zhong was speechless; he did not know how to respond.

Xu Ziling was angry too. “May I ask Miss, is Da Longtou in?” he asked.

Zhai Jiao slapped the small table by her side, she roared, “What a brazen slave material! Are you deaf? Always speaking unnecessary words; perhaps you want me to give you a beating before you are willing to behave yourselves.”

[Translator’s note: slave material 奴材 nu cai, nu – slave, cai – material. During Deer and Cauldron project, the word was 奴才 nu cai – slave. I don’t know whether the text is incorrect or Huang Yi intentionally used 奴材 instead of 奴才. Unless somebody could verify for me, I will use the literal translation: slave material.]

Kou and Xu, two boys looked at each other in astonishment. They brought this important and very useful information, who would have thought that they were considered slave material this and slave material that, and each time she opened her mouth she was shouting about beating and killing?

Seeing the two boys finally kept quiet out of fear, Zhai Jiao started to feel satisfied. Pointing to Xu Ziling, she said, “You look a bit honest, you tell me.”

Suppressing his anger, Xu Ziling said in low voice, “Please inquire, Miss.”

Zhai Jiao’s expression relaxed slightly; she nodded and said, “How did you climb up the beam? Based on Die’s martial art skill, how could he not know that

you were hiding there? Moreover, based on Die's martial art skill, even if someone was hiding in the chest wanting to mount a sneak attack on him, it is unlikely that he would succeed. I'll say Die did not look like he received any injury at all; that man covered in Buddhist monk's robe mustn't be my Die."

Kou Zhong was stunned. "This matter is very easy to confirm," he said, "As long as Miss asks Da Longtou, won't everything be clear?"

Zhai Jiao roared, "Shut up! Who allowed you to talk?"

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "I was just going to say the same thing. Find Da Longtou, one question, and the whole truth will be revealed.

Zhai Jiao's plump, but not exquisitely shaped huge breasts, which looked like inflated protrusion on her chest, heaved violently up and down several times; her big eyes glowered at them as she said, "I will deal properly with this matter; you stay here, wait for Die to be back."

Xu Ziling knitted his eyebrows and said, "How long must we wait?"

Zhao Jiao was a bit gentler toward Xu Ziling; unexpectedly she was willing to answer, "Ten days, eight days, nobody can tell. What can you do? I cannot feed you for free."

Hearing that, Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong looked at each other. This Big Miss of the Zhai family, whom Susu said that her temper was not good, but her character was very good, did indeed treat them as slave materials who came to seek shelter to her.

Kou Zhong tested her, "Excuse me, Miss, may I talk now?"

Zhai Jiao seemed to particularly loathe Kou Zhong; she impatiently said, "Speak quickly."

Kou Zhong pressed on, "Is it possible for us to rest for several days, and we'll decide on what kind of work we do after Da Longtou returns?"

Zhai Jiao replied crossly, "I wish I had known earlier that you are a lazy guy. Was the rest last night not enough? Whenever the kitchen lacks manpower, you go there to help. Remember, you are not allowed to tell anybody about this matter; otherwise I will chop your head."

Kou and Xu, two boys did not know whether they should cry or laugh. Right there and then they decided that they must persuade Susu to leave with them.

At the kitchen, the two boys moving and lifting, chopping melon and slicing meat, washing the dishes and plates, and were very busy in general until late at night before they could return to rest in the small room for the workers.

While they sighing in despair, Susu came. Apologetically she said, "I don't understand either, why Miss treats you this bad. But my two good brothers [didi, younger brother], please bear with it for a while. When Da Longtou returns, everything will be different."

Kou Zhong tried to analyze the situation, "I think she is annoyed that we unmasked the fact that she was abducted. She is the kind of person who puts emphasis on saving her face; naturally she is not happy."

Susu was displeased, "Can you not talk about her like that?" she said.

Xu Ziling shrugged his shoulders and said, "Now your Miss is clear about the whole thing, Jiejie has also fulfilled your obligation, it would be better if we leave immediately, go to Luoyang to find Li Dage."

Susu's pretty face changed slightly; she shook her head helplessly.

Kou Zhong was confused, "Could it be that Susu Jie does not miss Li Dage?"

Biting her lip, Susu said in small voice, "Even if I do, what's the use?"

Hearing that, the two boys' heart sank. Could it be that this divine woman had the heart, but in his rush to be a ruler Li Jing did not have the dream?

Susu looked at the two boys distressingly for a moment, and then she said with a hollow laugh, "Your Li Dage's ambition is higher than the sky, he does not have any care about boy-girl feeling; I plead you from now on not to put he and I together, is that alright? Besides, I basically am unworthy of him."

The two boys were left speechless, they both felt sorry for her, although they did not understand why she thought that she was unworthy.

Susu changed the subject; she smiled and said, "You have not had the opportunity to tell Jiejie your encounters after we parted; why don't you let Jiejie listen?"

It was just like the two boys have just met the only family they had in this whole wide world; chatting and laughing they narrated their experience this past year or so.

Susu's pretty face blushed slightly as she said, "Two Didi are so bad; all day long the only thing in your mind is visiting brothels."

Xu Ziling did not expect that after telling her about all kinds of exciting and dangerous adventures, the only thing Susu noticed was this aspect. Feeling terribly wronged, he said, "It was Kou Zhong's idea, I was only forced to follow him."

Embarrassed, Kou Zhong laughed awkwardly, "You, this guy, only know how to put the blame on me; you yourself don't have that desire?"

Susu's pretty face turned even redder; she irately said, "Stop it! All men are like that."

The two boys looked at her in astonishment.

Susu lowered her pretty face, suddenly she spoke in mosquito-like voice, "Do you want Jiejie to serve you?"

Xu Ziling was greatly shaken, "Susu Jie!" he gasped.

Susu distressingly said, "Jiejie already accompanied other men, and you are not my flesh and blood Didi, so what's the problem?"

Kou Zhong's countenance changed, "How could Jiejie be good with other men? Li Dage ... hey ..."

Big drops of tears rolled down from Susu's elegant eyes; hanging her head low she said, "Jiejie is only a servant, master's order, I must obey; how can I make decision for myself?"

The two boys suddenly understood; righteous indignation immediately filled their breasts!

Kou Zhong stood up suddenly, he cursed, "I'll go staking my life against that bitch."

Horried, Susu pulled him back and cried out in grief, "It has nothing to do with Miss!"

With eyes shooting flames Xu Ziling said, "Then who did it?"

Susu forced Kou Zhong back into his chair first before speaking with a sob, "That time Miss has not returned yet, Laoye was entertaining his subordinates in the mansion, Duke Mi also came. That night I came out to serve, someone asked for me from Laoye. Laoye agreed ..."

Speaking to this point, her sob turned into silent tears.

The two boys were seething in anger, but when they asked that man's name and surname, Susu was unwilling to tell them.

Quite a while later, the three people's emotion cooled down a little bit.

“Must be Li Mi, that son of a b1tch,” Kou Zhong angrily said, “Let us go and stake our lives against him.”

Susu’s countenance changed, “It wasn’t him!” she said.

Xu Ziling probed her, “If you don’t tell us, we’ll just assume it was him. Old fellow Zhai is not a good man either.”

Susu anxiously said, “Laoye had no choice either; since the great victory over Xingyang, everybody said the greatest meritorious service belonged to Duke Mi, the fame of Duke of Pushan soared even higher. Ay, I am not supposed to tell you.”

Gnashing his teeth in anger Kou Zhong said, “If we had known, Susu Jie shouldn’t come back here.”

Susu wiped the tears using the corner of her sleeve, she forced a faint pained smile as she said in low voice, “Now you know why Jiejie didn’t want to see Li Dage again. Besides, he regarded me as his little sister. After that matter happened, Jiejie did not wish to live anymore, but I always felt that you are always lucky and under Heaven’s care, so I bore humiliation, hoping that there would come a day when I see you again. And now my wish is fulfilled.”

Xu Ziling seriously said, “Susu Jie must never have any thought of suicide. We are leaving tonight. As long as we can find some kind of hook and rope, we can bring Jiejie out. Afterwards we sister and brothers will not part anymore.”

Susu simply shook her head.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Why is Jiejie still reluctant to leave? Is it ... hey ...”

“Don’t make random guess,” Susu firmly said, “I really wish to tear that traitor into ten thousand pieces, but I am thinking of Miss’ kindness. Ay, how about this? After Laoye is back, and everything is made clear, Jiejie will entirely listen to your thought.”

Xu Ziling did not have any mood to stay; he resolutely said, "As soon as Zhai Rang hear it, he will immediately know whether this matter is true or bogus, there is no point in us staying here. If Jiejie is determined to follow us, tomorrow we will slip out of the mansion to procure the tools to escape. We'll leave in the dark."

"The most critical thing is that we must avoid Shen woman's eyes and ears," Kou Zhong added.

Under the two boys' expectant eyes, finally Susu nodded her head.

Zhai family's maids, servants, odd-job workers, guards, *etc.* numbered as much as around three hundred. Zhai Rang only had one daughter. His first wife died about two years ago. In Zhai Rang's absence, Zhai Jiao was in charge.

Zhai Rang had three concubines, but none of them dared to provoke Zhai Jiao, this female overlord; thereupon Zhai Jiao, one person, ended up monopolizing the affairs within the Mansion.

In Zhai Mansion, because Susu was Zhai Jiao's personal maid, although she did not like to stick her head in the mansion's affairs, but most people were more or less looking at her face and thus treated Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling well.

As a matter of fact, by this time the two boys were even taller, robust and magnificent compared to those mansion guards. Their eyes lively and showed their quick-witted, no servants in the mansion dared to provoke them.

But because Zhai Jiao was deliberately tormenting them, the two boys' job was heavy work of cleaning and other low-grade work in the kitchen. Naturally nobody dared to change this arrangement.

Since before dawn the two boys had been called to work and continued on until the kitchen finished preparing and serving breakfast. After being busy for two sichen [i.e. 4 hours] the two boys finally found the opportunity to slip out of the kitchen.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “While washing the dishes, I did my best to practice. I never knew it could be so relaxing.”

Xu Ziling was also very pleased of himself; he said, “These past few days whenever I circulated the true qi within my body, more and more I was able to hear random things. Try it, send your true qi to the acupoint on your eardrums, we can even hear very clearly people far away gossiping about us in low voices.”

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted, “I will definitely try as soon as we go back, right now shopping is more important, this Da Longwan Fu [big dragon stupid mansion] is lifeless, it’s not suitable for us to stay for a long time.”

Xu Ziling wrapped his arm around Kou Zhong’s shoulder as they strode toward the front courtyard. He sighed and said, “When I think about our Big Miss, everything came to a halt, I just want to leave quickly.”

The two boys were wearing servant attire in which they worked, not only their clothes were stained with grease and patches of splashing water, their heads, hairs, hands and faces were not spared either. In fact, they did not look any better than when they were still in Yangzhou.

Kou Zhong proudly said, “That so-called ‘uncle manager’ or ‘big kitchen manager’ or what have you, I saw his technique in cooking dishes and seasoning; coming and going, he only uses several tricks, so I knew that the dishes he is preparing will all taste the same. If we brothers are in charge of his mother’s cooking, I guarantee that those Madame and Miss’ saliva will run over.”

By the time he finished talking, they have not crossed the wall surrounding the mansion yet, suddenly a cold snort coming from the front. At this point they were still walking along the corridor by the mansion, heading toward the large square in front of the mansion. Three mansion guards appeared from nowhere and blocked their way. The leader was one named Zhang Li, Susu has introduced them to him, hence they recognized him. This time he was confronting them arrogantly.

The two boys halted their steps and asked in surprise, “What’s the matter?”

Zhang Li stood with his hands akimbo; casting a sidelong glance toward the two boys, he said, “Didn’t anybody tell you? Inner mansion’s servants are not allowed to go to the front mansion. Not abiding by the rules so soon, are we?”

Kou Zhong tried his luck; he laughed and said, “We are not going to the front mansion at all, we are going to the street.”

The other mansion guard said, “Who sent you to go outside?”

Kou Zhong’s finger rubbed his own nose; he said, “Me.”

Zhang Li snapped, “Go back quickly. Without her order, you are not allowed to leave the mansion’s door even for half a step.”

Xu Ziling laughed aloud and said, “This is the greatest joke. We are not prisoners, at most we only skip work. We insist on leaving.”

Zhang Li and the others, three men, immediately appeared angry. One of them thundered, “How dare you? Are you tired of living?”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “This brother of mine is bad-tempered, three Dashu [great uncles] Daren [title of respect toward superiors] are Daliang [magnanimous], please forgive us this time.”

Pulling Xu Ziling along he turned around and left. He spoke in low voice, “Hero will not suffer loss frontally. If the entire Zhai mansion guards surround us, we, the two newly emerged martial art masters, will immediately fall from glory.”

And then he added, “Just now I tried the skill you told me about, focusing my energy on the ears, instantly I was able to hear soft even breathing, as if it was not there, from inside the main hall. This person is a lot more formidable than Zhang Li and those abysmal characters. Evidently he is the real martial art master in the mansion.”

Xu Ziling nodded and said, “Ol’ Zhai is afraid his beloved daughter will be abducted again, naturally he dispatched martial art experts to protect her. Are

we going back to our room to sleep now?”

With an air of complacency Kou Zhong said, “If the front door is impassable, we’ll take the back door, and we’ll leave immediately. People like Zhang Li and those lowly figures, it would be strange indeed if they don’t sow discord by telling that female overlord. Therefore, after we buy our stuffs, we must hide it well inside the mansion, so that that evil woman will not snatch it to become her own ‘mother monkey climbing the tree’ training tool. Ha!”

The two boys walked over the gravel path connecting the front and rear courtyards. A pack of five, six good-looking maids were walking directly toward them. Seeing the two boys, their eyes lit up. The bold ones even raised their eyebrows and made eyes with them, with a hint of smile at the corner of their mouth.

Although these maids were only slightly good-looking, they have given a big boost to the two boys’ confidence of their own sex appeal, making the two boys felt like they were walking on air.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Too bad we are going to slip away tonight. Otherwise we may not need to go to the pleasure house to shed this ‘litter-of-the-nest, green-head’ status.”

Xu Ziling admonished him, “Those are daughters of decent families, if we spoil them, we may not be able to feed them far and wide, and then we will be bored to death.”

Kou Zhong was shaken. “I have not thought about that aspect,” he said, “Looks like going to the pleasure house is more direct and efficient. Ay, but after this there will be Susu Jie watching on the side. On a lot of things we must be a bit more careful.”

In the meantime they have reached the big flower garden at the back of the mansion. Water was flowing in the little creek, the landscape was in good taste. Two good-looking maids were pruning the flowers and plants. Seeing the two boys coming, they whispered to each other and their pretty eyes stole a glance at them, a glance heavy with desire. However, the two boys could only avert

their eyes as they walked straight pass them.

When the back door was in sight, they saw a middle age man wearing grey clothes was sitting quietly on a stone bench in the little pavilion on their left. The man was smoking pipe leisurely, swallowing clouds and blowing out fog, seemingly oblivious of these two boys.

The two boys did not give him any thought either; but as they were about to push the door and go out, the man in grey suddenly called out, “Two Xiao Xiongdi, please come here and speak a few words with me.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged a glance; they knew something was not right, yet they did not have any idea how to deal with it, hence they could only brace themselves and walk over to the pavilion.

The man in grey looked ordinary, but his bones and joints looked thick and solid, his complexion carried a strange red-purple aura, his eyes looked lively but also looked dull at the same time. He was indeed a profound mystery.

The two boys remembered seeing him in the mansion from a distance, and the other people were very respectful toward him, but they did not know his status.

With his pipe he pointed to the two stone blocks across the stone table from where he sat, and said, “Please have a seat.”

The two boys had no choice but to sit facing him.

The man in grey smiled and said, “I am Tu Shufang, the Longtou Mansion’s zongguan [chief manager]; my specific responsibility is the security of the mansion. I wonder where are two Xiao Xiongdi going?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Kou Zhong said, “Just want to slip away to the street to roam around! Ever since we arrived at Xingyang, we haven’t had a chance to look around, it’s too bad.”

Tu Shufang nodded, “That is only natural,” he said, “But Miss commanded that

if two Xiao Xiongdi did not have any urgent matter to attend to, it would be best if you don't leave Longtou Mansion, everything can be discussed when Longtou Laoda is back."

Xu Ziling's temper flared, "Won't that mean we are prisoners here?"

Tu Shufang sighed, "We don't have any choice in this matter either," he said, and then continued, "May I ask what animosity two gentlemen have against Shen Luoyan?"

The two boys were shaken; they inwardly blamed themselves for being muddleheaded and have not given any thought that Shen Luoyan would surely keep her tiger-eyes on them, and that Longtou Mansion was actually the only safe place for them.

Kou Zhong did not answer, but asked a question instead, "Did Miss ever tell Zongguan why we came here?"

Tu Shufang's eyes were gleaming with lively ray, showing his consummate profound internal energy. He fixed his gaze on Kou Zhong for half a day before speaking in heavy tone, "When Miss told the Ol' Tu to inquire two Xiao Xiongdi's affair, she only said I must protect you with all my strength. Naturally Ol' Tu must follow the order."

Xu Ziling spoke in low voice, "How long has Zongguan been with Da Longtou?"

Tu Shufang also replied in low voice, "Two gentlemen please feel free to speak up, since whenever Da Longtou has something in his mind, he won't conceal it from me either."

Kou Zhong was not convinced yet. He asked, "What had happened to Miss recently, is Zongguan clear about that?"

Tu Shufang's countenance showed a trace of fear. It was quite a while later that he finally said, "Naturally I am clear, but I wonder which matter the two gentlemen were referring to?"

Xu Ziling said, “Naturally it is concerning Miss traveling outside. Miss told us not to tell anyone, will Zongguan have the guts to hear it?”

Tu Shufang threw his head back and let out a long laughter, his bearing looked heroic and imposing; he said nonchalantly, “You have guts to speak up, I will have the guts to listen.”

Seeing he did not have the slave mentality, the two boys’ impression on him improved by leaps and bounds, so why would they take Zhai Jiao’s warning to heart? Thereupon they told him first about their encounter with Susu, and then they narrated in detail what had happened in the abandoned village.

When they finished, Tu Shufang’s countenance turned extremely unsightly.

It was quite a while before Tu Shufang’s countenance returned to normal. He asked in amazement, “In that case, two Xiao Xiongdi must have possessed divine skill; otherwise, how could you hide on the beam, and could evade those people’s eyes and ears? On the surface, although two gentlemen have lofty physiques, your waist and steps steady, and you are calm and composed, your eyes do not reveal inner gleam; could it be that you have reached the ‘unpolished gem returns to the truth’ boundary instead?”

Kou Zhong knew that although he spoke politely, the bottom line was that he doubted the authenticity of their tale. He calmly replied, “That is because our internal energy departs from the usual path, it differs greatly from martial art skill in general. If you don’t believe me there is no harm in testing us.”

Tu Shufang held out his hand and said with a smile, “In that case let’s just shake hands!”

Kou Zhong gulped. Although he agreed to also reach out and shake his hand, he still said, “You must not apply a heavy hand!”

Tu Shufang smiled mischievously and said, “Of course!” while applying his strength at the same time.

At first Kou Zhong felt that the opponent's hand suddenly turned into an iron hoop, which was continuously tightening up; when his finger bones were about to crack, the true qi inside his body automatically flowed through his wrist. Although he still felt severe pain, he was able to endure it.

Tu Shufang was shocked. "Xiao Xiongdì's internal strength is indeed unusually strange; it seems to exist but not there either. It is deep and unmeasurable."

For the first time the two boys received an assessment from a martial art master; they were greatly delighted.

Tu Shufang consecutively sent his strength to break the opponent's true qi, but each time it was neutralized by Kou Zhong. Finally he let go and said, "Ol' Tu believes."

But then he frowned and asked, "Based on your skill, why are you willing to stay in the kitchen and receive such maltreatment?"

Xu Ziling said with a bitter laugh, "What can we do? It's Miss' order."

Tu Shufang pondered for half a day, and then he shook his head and said, "But Da Longtou did not look the least bit like he suffered internal injury. What actually happened here?"

Kou Zhong said, "Did Miss really get abducted and taken away, later on Zu Junyan pretended to rescue her and bring her back?"

"That is correct," Tu Shufang replied, "But in the Mansion, other than the Ol' Tu, nobody else knew about it. This is no small matter, presently I can only be regarded as not knowing. Everything has to wait for Da Longtou's return and then let him decide."

Seeing him this sensible, Xu Ziling let out a breath of relief, "So we can go out and roam around?" he asked.

Tu Shufang shook his head, "You can't go out even more," he said, "Right now

Shen Luoyan stationed her men outside; the Mansion is under close surveillance. I dare not report this matter to Miss, afraid that she might create a disturbance; that's why I hope Da Longtou would come back soon."

Recalling Shen Luoyan's ruthlessness, how could the two boys still dare to swagger out to buy the tools they were going to use to flee?

"Where is Da Longtou?" Kou Zhong casually asked.

Seeing that the two boys bared their soul to him, plus they were still naïve, candid and lovely, Tu Shufang felt some indescribable feeling welling up in his heart. He replied, "Da Longtou and Duke Mi are going on an all-out effort to attack Xingluo Storehouse. If we win this battle, the muddleheaded ruler's days are numbered."

Kou Zhong scratched his head and asked, "What kind of storehouse is Xingluo Storehouse anyway? Why is it so important?"

Tu Shufang patiently explained, "Xingluo Storehouse is located east of Luoyang, at the mouth of River Luo west of Xingyang, which is the confluence of the Canal and the Yellow River. The storehouse city wall encompasses twenty-something li, incorporating three thousand big cellars, each cellar contains eight thousand dan [dry measure of grain, approx. 100 liters/28 bushels]. If we can obtain such storehouse, our Wagang Army need not worry that we won't have enough army provisions for the next ten years."

Xu Ziling was puzzled. "Is the Sui Dynasty that stupid?" he asked, "Why would they set up such a clear target for others to attack?"

Tu Shufang let out a hollow laugh; he said, "When they set up the storehouse, how could they know that such a day would come? In those days, the primary objective of setting up such storehouse was to collect rice grain taxation to supply the imperial court. You should know that when Emperor Wen established Chang'an [modern day Xi'an], oftentimes the Guanzhong Plain [Shaanxi, valley of River Wei] did not produce enough crops to supply the demand of the Capital. Transporting the grains from the east one must take the dangerous and difficult path of Sanmenxia [lit. three-gate gorge], plus it was time-consuming and effort-

heavy. After this big granary was built, the Capital was able to maintain the stability of grain supply.”

Kou Zhong was distressed. “In that case,” he said, “Nobody knows when Da Longtou will be coming back; won’t that mean that we will still have to continue chopping firewood, fetching water, washing the dishes and mopping the floor every day?”

Tu Shufang laughed. “That’s easy,” he said, “Let me talk it over with Miss.”

For lack of better option, the two boys helplessly agreed. Besides, on further thought they still had Susu to accompany them, plus they could take this opportunity to secretly train their martial art. After all, this Big Boss Mansion could still be considered as a cozy refuge.

Thinking to this point, they were even more relieved.

‘Beating the snake following the stick’ [see Book 3, Chapter 3], Kou Zhong said, “Apart from our internal energy, which appears a bit decent, our punching and kicking skill is only so-so. I wonder if Zongguan would mind giving us a bit of pointers.”

Tu Shufang gladly said, “Because of your honest humility, you can consider this time you found the right person. Considering I have heard the news that you upheld justice in faraway places, also you have saved Susu, I cannot be stingy. Let me pass on to you the skill that I am most proud of, the ‘Twelve-hand Qinna [grab and capture, grappling technique] Meridian-severing Technique’. Let’s see if it will be useful for you.”

In great delight the two boys immediately bowed with cupped fist to express their gratitude.

This moment, even if someone chased them away with a stick, they would definitely refuse to leave.

Book 4 Chapter 8 – Bird Inside The Cage

Indeed other than Zhai Jiao, Tu Shufang was the most influential person in the Longtou Mansion. That very same day they were excused from the drudgery of the kitchen work, and their accommodation was also upgraded to the guards' living quarters at the inner courtyard, where each person had a spacious bed to sleep on.

For the past many years, the two boys have been sitting and lying down together like form and shadow; momentarily they felt unaccustomed to it, but they also felt it was a novel experience.

Whenever Susu had spare time, she would visit them, she also sewed new clothes for them. The sister-brother feeling grew even deeper as they lived happily together.

Tu Shufang grew fond of the boys as well; he unreservedly passed on his most exquisite skill of 'Twelve-hand Qinna Meridian-severing Technique', he even gave them pointers in their other martial arts.

Tu Shufang was able to become the Longtou Mansion's Zongguan, certainly it was not by luck at all. In Jianghu, he was an all-powerful figure [orig. 'rebuke the Heaven and Earth']. Within the Wagang Army, in term of martial art skill he ranked under Zhai Rang, Li Mi and Wang Bo. Receiving this kind of martial art master's direction, naturally the two boys' skill advanced by leaps and bounds.

When this great Tu Shufang taught them acupoint sealing technique, he said, "Everybody's arteries, veins and qi are like the lines on our palms, no two are alike. Also, following the time of the day, the weather, different air circulation, the timing must be flexible, the response adaptable, otherwise it will be difficult

to achieve the desired effect.”

“That’s easy,” Kou Zhong cheerfully said, “As long as we send a stream of true qi first, and the mind following the qi, we can sense what is true and what is false.”

Tu Shufang was shaken, “Mind following qi?” he said, “Are you saying that after the true qi enters someone else’s body you can still interact with the condition of that stream of true qi?”

Xu Ziling nodded, “Exactly,” he said, “We always do it that way, it’s really fun!”

With an incredulous expression on his face Tu Shufang said, “That kind of realm, I am afraid even Da Longtou is not able to achieve. Could it be that ‘Secret to Long Life’ is really that formidable?”

After spending time together for several days, Kou and Xu already told him what happened in the past, hence he was clear about the origin of the two boys’ martial art.

Kou Zhong said excitedly, “Even that chicken freak Yuwen Wudi was beaten by us that he covered his head and sneaked away like a rat. Turns out our internal energy is so unusual.”

Tu Shufang said in shock, “You mean Yuwen Wudi of the Yuwen Clan?” This part they have yet to tell Tu Shufang, hence they told him what happened.

Tu Shufang shook his head and sighed, “Over time, perhaps the two of you will be added to Ning Daoqi’s rank. When I learned ‘Twelve-hand Qinna Meridian-severing Technique’ from Enshi [benevolent master], I had to train hard for three years before making a small progress. You only learned it for three days and already have clear and logical understanding; the only thing lacking is maturity. If I am telling it to others, nobody would believe me.”

Kou Zhong was about to speak, one of the underlings came to report that Shen Luoyan wanted to see them.

Tu Shufang was already aware of their conflict with Shen Luoyan; he said, "Even if she had gargantuan guts, she would not dare to behave atrociously in here. Let me come with you, I want to see what kind of trick she is going to play against you."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had their own difficulty, because they had not told Tu Shufang the matter concerning Duke Yang Treasure; naturally they were afraid Shen Luoyan might bring it up. Thereupon Kou Zhong said, "We are not afraid of her. Let us deal with her alone."

Tu Shufang thought that he was showing off, hence he did not insist.

The two boys went to the main hall and saw Shen Luoyan was enjoying a pot of indoor plant.

It was the first time that the two boys set foot on this main hall, which Wagang Army considered 'Main Conference Hall'. The lobby of this leader's mansion was magnificent and extravagant. The layout was set according to 'seat on the north facing south, three pillars seven beams, resting-on-the-mountain style', which was heavy with meaning and symbolism.

The hall was furnished with primarily red wood furniture, the four walls were filled with famous paintings. Six octagonal palace lanterns were hanging from the beam; rich, beautiful, and elegant. Most impressive of all, beyond the rectangular window that all four sides were highly decorated, one could see the hundred years old tree and the dancing and swaying bamboo grove outside, along with the autumn sun, which shone its light into the hall, resembling the nature itself.

It was in this mesmerizing scenery that this beautiful Shen Luoyan, wearing her charming face barely hidden behind a fashionable veiled hat, appeared before the two boys. From their angle of view, the veil at back of the hat hung down to her waist, the skirt of the hat drooped down over her arms and was open, trailing over her shoulders, greatly amplifying the elegance silhouette of her back and shoulders. Watching all of these, the two boys momentarily could only stare blankly.

Shen Luoyan slowly turned around, with sweet, enthralling smile she said, "I came to make peace with you!"

Hearing this, the two boys looked at each other. If this b1tch was really willing to make peace, that means the sun could also rise from the west.

Kou Zhong smirked and said, "And the condition?"

Shen Luoyan lightly took jade steps, lithely and with flair went over to the two boys. It was only then did they find out that her clothes was rather revealing. It was an embroidered butterfly gown with round neck and narrow, straight sleeve, reaching down toward her feet. The line and pattern were delicate, the color simple yet elegant; but the neckline was low, almost reaching to her cleavage, exposing her fully rounded, milky white breasts.

Noticing the two boys' stare was dead centered her silky bosom, she was greatly displeased, "How can you be this rude, staring on certain place on my body?"

'Glug!' Kou Zhong swallowed his saliva; having difficulty breathing, he said, "Clearly it was you who came here to seduce us; just consider us surrendering to you. All right, I'll take you as my wife for the night."

Shen Luoyan cast him a sidelong glance and said, "A woman cannot have two husbands, which one of you should I marry?"

Xu Ziling was more clear-headed; he cautiously said, "Are you thinking of driving a wedge between us, brothers?"

Shen Luoyan forced a smiled and said, "Is the brotherly feeling between you that weak? Ay! I am not here to blather with you; back to the topic: may I ask, do you want these two antidotes?" Spreading her jade palm, she showed two light green pills, which, in the two boys' eyes, looked dazzling.

Kou Zhong recalled that they had already fallen into her trap once, he was on alert inwardly. He smiled and said, "How do we know this is not 'piercing

intestine poison'? And then when we get to the Yellow Springs, you would jeer at us."

Shen Luoyan returned the pills into her bosom. Nonchalantly she said, "If you don't want it, then let's forget about it. Just don't say that I, Shen Luoyan, did not remember you. Those who took 'strength-scattering' drug and did not take the antidote within ten days will become useless people who cannot train internal energy forever. At that time, don't you regret it!"

Seeing her coy smile and flirtatious manner, Xu Ziling knew clearly that her words were incomparably sinister; anger arose in his heart, "Even if we die, we won't need people like you to feel sorry for us."

Shen Luoyan pretended to be surprised, "Why do you treat me like you have ten grievances and nine animosities against me? Whatever Luoyan did, I do it all for the sake of Wagang Army. Since you sincerely want to rely on Da Longtou's help, we are on the same side; we ought to make peace now!"

Kou Zhong sneered and said, "You just did it all for your Pushan whatever Duke Mi. Ha! You still want us to have a good impression on you? Just like last time, not only we helped you breaking Qin Shubao's heavy siege, we helped you turned defeat into victory. Those many different kinds of favor, you repeatedly harmed us in return. Now I have thought it through, I don't want you, this b1tch, to accompany me even for one night!"

Shen Luoyan did not seem to take any offence at all, she only said crossly, "Even though you repeatedly insulted me, I have yet made any move against you, two little demons; are you still saying I don't remember past friendships? All right! En garde!"

The two boys were startled; they have forgotten all about any 'moon in the water' mental cultivation, and retreated hastily and in fear.

Actually, Shen Luoyan did not have any intention to make any move; laughing merrily like quivering flower stems she said, "Turns out somebody already neutralized the poison in your body. No wonder you don't want to be seduced. But your experience is really shallow; with only an empty threat others can see

through you clearly.”

The two boys lost too much face; without any choice they had to curse their own uselessness. At the same time they realized that if they were not confused and disoriented by the seduction of her alluring beauty, how could they fail to see whether her move was fake or real? A real martial art master would never be confused by the charm of a woman.

Shen Luoyan turned around and walked over toward a redwood table and chairs set on the corner. She sat down, placed her elbows on the table, struck a very charming posture with her hands supporting her chin, and said tenderly, “My two Xiao Didi [little younger brother] who want to marry me, sit down! The time to talk has come.”

Displeased, Xu Ziling said, “What makes you think that you can boss us around?”

Shen Luoyan calmly replied, “Does the word ‘someone’s treasure’ carry enough weight?”

Immediately the two boys’ countenance changed.

Just based on this one sentence, they knew that Shen Luoyan had planted a spy in the Big Boss Mansion. Moreover, the spy’s status could not be low, so that she knew that the two boys have concealed the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’ matter from the people in the Big Boss Mansion.

If this matter leaked out, it would be greatly disadvantageous to the two boys. Worse yet, nobody knew what kind of method Zhai Rang was going to take to deal with them.

Helplessly they had to sit across from her.

Shen Luoyan rolled her beautiful eyes on the two boys’ faces for a moment before smiling sweetly and said, “If I could pick, I will choose Xiao Ling as my husband, and Xiao Zhong as my lover. Then the two little demons could share

nujia's cup of soup." [reminder: nujia – female slave, a humble way a woman referring to self.]

Kou Zhong dejectedly said, "Beautiful must not toy with us, just be direct!"

In all honesty, even Shen Luoyan herself did not understand why she loved to tease them. All along she had always been showing her proud and arrogant side to men, and that was not a fake display. But when dealing with these two boys, unwittingly she had the urge to tease and make fun of them in regards of men-women relationship.

Shen Luoyan sighed and said, "Do you understand the present situation? First of all, the people of Da Longtou Mansion do not allow you to leave the mansion even for half a step. Secondly, I may do everything in my power to prevent you from leaving Xingyang. Therefore, although presently you appear to be free and easy, the fact is, you are no more than birds inside the cage; you have absolutely no power to be independent."

"You don't need to worry about that," Xu Ziling coldly said.

Shen Luoyan lowered her voice and said, "Right now within the Wagang Army, I am the only one who knew that you have the secret to 'Duke Yang Treasure' in you, but if I reveal it, even Nujia does not know what kind of situation might develop. Just a friendly reminder, Wagang Army has specialists in extracting confession by torture, those experts will not be as polite and fun as I am."

"If that's the case," Kou Zhong wondered, "Why do you still need to be this longwinded?"

"Because," Shen Luoyan replied, "I have a favorable impression toward you! I do not wish to see you being tortured that while still alive, you will be reduced to become crippled people. Furthermore, it will also implicate your Su Jie. Although she could be considered Wang Bodang's woman, under that kind of circumstances, even Wang Bodang himself won't shield her."

The two boys were greatly shaken; on one hand they knew she had their Achilles heel, on the other hand, now they knew the traitor's name who raped

and humiliated their Su Jie.

Looking at the two boys' expression, Shen Luoyan was satisfied. "Therefore," she said, "It would be best if we can make a fair dealing. My two good Xiao Didi, what do you say?"

Kou Zhong felt that they had fallen into absolute disadvantageous position, that they were being led by the nose by this 'concealed dagger within a smile' beauty. With a wry smile he said, "If we knew where the treasure is hidden, we would have plundered it early on; why would we want to bicker with you in a hopelessly muddled way like a pair of husband and wife?"

Shen Luoyan shrugged her shoulders and said nonchalantly, "All right! In that case I'll go see Miss immediately, let's see how she is going to handle you, the two little demons."

Kou Zhong smiled apologetically and said, "Everything is negotiable. If you want the location of the treasure, we can casually give you one to satisfy your curiosity!"

Shen Luoyan angrily said, "Looks like you absolutely don't know the meaning of regret. Very well! Let's not talk about whether you really don't know or just pretend not to know the location of the treasure, tell me quickly why Miss is so protective of you? And don't tell me that it is as simple as because you rescued her little maid."

The two boys immediately felt their scalp grew numbed. Who could tell whether Shen Luoyan was not Zu Junyan's accomplice?

Shen Luoyan straightened her tender body, her beautiful eyes flashed with cold rays. "Since you arrived here, Miss has deployed a troop division under Da Longtou's direct command from outside the city, their number reaches five hundred men. What actually is going on here?"

By this time the two boys were already fully occupied by bemoaning the craftiness of this lovely b1tch; they hurriedly racked their brains to get out of this situation.

Kou Zhong rolled his eyes; he was about to concoct some stories when Shen Luoyan said with a laugh, “Are you thinking of lying to me?”

Right this moment, when the two boys were completely at a loss of what to say, one of Shen Luoyan’s underlings rushed in and reported, “Our troops have attacked and captured Luoxing [sic] Storehouse [it was Xingluo in the previous chapter]; Duke Mi is sending his order to send reinforcement right away, would Miss please make decision.”

Shen Luoyan stood up in great delight; she said to the two boys, “I have no time to chat nonsense with you right now, plus you cannot leave anyway, so I’ll find another day to deal with you, two little demons!” Finished speaking she left in a hurry.

Recalling that the Big Boss Zhai Rang would soon return, the two boys could not stop their hearts from thumping wildly. Since Zu Junyan was Li Mi’s trusted aide, would they incite conflict between those two?

That evening, Shen Luoyan led the army leaving the city. Almost at the same time, Zhai Jiao also left the city. But Tu Shufang would not reveal her destination; everything seemed to be very mysterious.

Without Zhai Jiao, the Zhai Mansion immediately regained its liveliness, everybody seemed to be breathing a bit easier. Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong and Susu, three people ate their dinner together. Soon afterwards, Tu Shufang came in to join them. He asked about Shen Luoyan. Kou Zhong mentioned the part about neutralizing the poison, but he did not say anything about the hidden treasure.

By speaking half-truth half-lie like this, Tu Shufang did not suspect anything. He only expressed his great amazement that they were able to force the strength-scattering drug out of their body using their internal energy.

But while talking about the capture of Luoxing Storehouse, Tu Shufang actually looked very worried. He sighed and said, “The reason we are able to capture Luokou Storehouse this time lies entirely in Duke Mi’s merit in deploying soldiers and dispatching generals. Although nominally Zhai Ye is the head, in reality the

power actually lies in Duke Mi's hands."

Li Jing's analysis remained fresh the three people's mind, naturally they understood the cause of his concern.

Tu Shufang also said, "Luokou fell, the imperial court must be shocked. Right now Yang Guang must be thinking of regaining Luokou at all cost by pulling things around. He must have ordered Liu Changgong and Pei Renji, two people to separately deploy their main forces from Luoyang and Hulao [tiger cage] to attack our troops at Luokou from two directions. If this battle is won, then we can be considered truly obtain Luoxing Storehouse. Otherwise we will have to return everything, both the capital and the interest."

After Tu Shufang left, Kou Zhong spoke in high spirit, "Shen Poniang went out to war, Su Jie's Big Miss also left and we don't know where she went. If we don't leave now, what are we waiting for?"

Susu mournfully said, "Why don't you two leave by yourselves?"

Xu Ziling was stunned, "That kind of master who regarded you as a gift they could give others at will, why is Su Jie so reluctant to leave?" he asked.

Susu sobbed and said, "Don't say anymore. This is for Miss' sake. How could I abandon her and leave in this kind of situation?"

The two boys were panicked; they busily raised their sleeves to wipe her tears.

Kou Zhong gently said, "My good Jiejie, please don't cry; we'll stay with you. Ay! But even if we stay, we won't do you any good."

Susu said, "After Laoye comes back, Jiejie will leave with you!"

For lack of better option, the two boys could only nod their agreement.

Early morning the next day, the two boys woke up and practiced their martial

art in the big garden at the rear courtyard, but Tu Shufang did not show up.

Due to Tu Shufang's influence, the two boys had full access to any weapon in the armory. This moment the two boys were in high spirit, they simply took out a bunch of different types of weapons: swords and spears, sabers and halberds, long weapons, short arms, they tried it all, testing all kinds of weapon, and were having a lot of fun.

Susu cheered on the side. The three sister and brothers had a happy and warm relationship.

Gradually there were more and more maids and servants coming and going; they did not want to show off too much, plus the boys were scared at the maids' passionate looks and coquettish glances, hence they called it a day. After taking a bath they changed into the new clothes Susu sewed for them. In their excitement, they wanted to seize this opportunity to slip away to the streets.

Somewhat nervous, the three of them sneaked out via the back door. Once they reached the street, they saw dead leaves covering the road; a desolate autumn scenery. Thinking about from the day they first met until today, two years had passed in the blink of an eye, right now Li Jing's whereabouts was unknown; they could not help feeling emotional.

Amidst the whistling autumn breeze, the three people walked side by side, with Susu holding on to the crook of the two boys' arms, strolling along the street.

The city of Xingyang was surprisingly thriving. According to Susu, it was due to Li Mi's deep understanding on how to win the people's hearts; therefore, the people in nearby towns and counties had their hearts attached to them while obtaining Wagang Army's protection.

After walking not even half a block, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling became aware of people on their trail. What they were most afraid of was Shen Luoyan, but since they knew she was out of town, there ought to be no one else who could deal with them. Therefore, they did not take it to heart and simply continued walking while joking, talking and laughing.

In the north, due to heavy influence of non-Han [hu] people, in general men and women were more unrestrained by convention. Therefore, although the three of them were having fun affectionately with each other in public, passers-by did not think it strange.

The three of them found a dumpling restaurant, so they sat down and ate and drank as much as they liked.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “After this we’ll go to cosmetics store, let Su Jie add flowers on brocade [i.e. decorating something that is already perfect], so that she will be more beautiful and alluring, and will pull men’s heart even more.”

Xu Ziling excitedly joined in, “And then we’ll go to silk and satin store, so that relying on her pair of magical hands, Su Jie can sew herself a gorgeous new clothes to celebrate the New Year.”

Susu nodded slightly, but her countenance remained grim.

Gnashing his teeth, Kou Zhong said, “Su Jie, please be assured that one day we will slaughter this lecherous traitor Wang Bodang so that Jiejie can purge your disgrace and wash away your hatred.”

Susu’s flower-like countenance turned pale, “How did you know it was him?” she asked, “You must never mention this matter anymore. Speaking about martial art skill, within Wagang Army, after Laoye and Duke Mi, he ranks next in line.”

And then she turned sad again and said, “This is the fate of a slave servant, Jiejie has to accept the misfortunes as decreed by fate. I forbid you to let your imagination run wild regarding this matter.”

The two boys remained silent in disappointment.

At this point, they suddenly sensed that there was someone coming straight at

them from the front door. Kou and Xu turned their gaze toward the approaching person, and were shocked.

Turned out it was a Baling Bang member who they once thought had a strong yiqi toward them, the son of the boss of Cuibi Lou of Pengcheng city, Xiang Yushan

Book 4 Chapter 9 – Sincere Collaboration

Xiang Yushan still looked like he was not completely awake yet, the look of a second generation prodigal son with green face and white lips, but his smile was still very much amiable. Without any trace of politeness he simply plopped himself down on a seat, and cheerily said, “Meeting old friends in a foreign land is indeed a real joy in life. And this is ...”

Kou Zhong had no choice but to introduce, “This is our Jiejie.”

Ever since Xu Ziling found out that he belonged to the notorious Baling Bang who specialized in human trafficking, he truly loathed this person from the bottom of his heart. He said coldly, “Since Xiang Xiong is Baling Bang man, it can be said that persons who walk different paths cannot make plans together. Right now we are not even friends, Xiang Xiong please excuse yourself.”

Listening to this remark, even Susu was confused; she was not clear about the relationship between Xiang Yushan and these two boys.

But Kou Zhong giggled and said, “What a coincidence, I wonder if Xiang Xiong has received favor from that Peng Liang Hui s1ut and is thinking of transferring us as your property to her?”

Xiang Yushan was still a slick and sly man; raising his hands in mock surrender he said, “Xu Xiong, Kou Xiong misunderstood me. You misunderstood our humble gang even more. Please let Xiaodi [little younger brother] ...”

Xu Ziling impatiently cut him off, “Could it be that Baling Bang is not in the business of selling human flesh but in selling pork meat?”

Kou Zhong patted Xiang Yushan's shoulder, while with 'brows raised in delight and eyes laughing' said, "I heard your precious gang is Yang Guang, that fatuous monarch's lapdog, and here is precisely the Wagang Army territory; if Xiang Xiong does not get out of here, this time it will be our turn to sell you."

Xiang Yushan smiled wryly and said, "Ever since we got to know each other, other than a bit of misunderstanding, we do not have any grudges. Could it be that two Xiongtai [brother, a polite appellation for a friend of one's age] will not even willing to give Xiaodi a chance to offer an explanation?"

Noticing that even after receiving a hundred insults from these two boys this man was still humbly stooping down trying to defend himself, Susu could not bear not to speak up, "Just give Xiang Gongzi a chance to offer an explanation!"

Xiang Yushan gratefully said, "Jiejie is really good."

"She is not your Jiejie," Xu Ziling crossly said.

While Kou Zhong snapped, "Spit it out!" [orig. 'you have fart, let it out']

But Xiang Yushan was amazingly patient; unexpectedly he still did not take any offence. Lowering his voice, he said, "Within Eight Gangs Ten Societies, our Baling Bang ranks second of the Eight Gangs, our reputation is extremely resounding; however, it was destroyed by some people who are blinded by greed in order for them to curry favor with Yang Guang."

Kou Zhong leaned closer to his ear and giggled in a weird way and said, "Certainly Xiang Xiong's manner looks just like those 'blinded by greed' people!"

Not to know whether to laugh or cry, Xiang Yushan said, "Kou Xiong please do not speak sarcastically to Xiaodi."

Xu Ziling asked in amazement, "People who resort to propriety must have some favor to ask. Since Xiang Xiong submits to humiliation like this, there must be a conspiracy behind this."

This has made Susu unable to stand by idly and watch; slightly on edge, she said, “Even prisoners have the right to speak, couldn’t you just let him finish?”

Xiang Yushan delightedly said, “Miss[1] indeed understands reason. I, Xiang Yushan hereby swear that other than owning and operating casino and brothel, I have never participated in that kind of ‘offending Heaven and reason’ activity the two Xiongtai are referring to.”

Kou Zhong sneered and asked, “Then where did you get those beautiful women in your casino from?”

Xiang Yushan replied, “If there is a single woman that our Xiang family has abducted and forced to be a prostitute, let me, Xiang Yushan, not die a good death.”

The two boys were simply too stunned for words.

Xiang Yushan heaved a sigh, and then he continued, “Truth be told, we have been harmed by that incapable ruler that we became like this. It was because our gang has always been in good relationship with the imperial court, plus there are members of our gang who became government officers. At first we only helped that muddle-headed ruler to gather beautiful women from all over the world for his merriment and sexual enjoyment. Who would have thought that this fatuous monarch is avaricious and insatiable? Just because he loves to go on a tour, he built palaces everywhere. Just from Luoyang to Yangzhou, he built no fewer than forty temporary imperial residences. And on each site he wanted over a hundred beauties to wait upon him. On top of that, he himself has several thousand imperial concubines and palace beauties. Just think, how many women he has altogether? We also have our hands and feet stuck deep in the mire.”

Of course the two boys had never imagined that Baling Bang had this kind of predicament; unwittingly their hostility toward Xiang Yushan was reduced by several degrees.

Xiang Yushan forlornly said, “Yang Guang not only loves women, he also loves men. And if that is not enough, the most terrifying thing is that he loves to do

new trick every day. For example, he wants to make ceremonial clothes from the feather and plumes of birds and beasts, so all birds and beasts with the desired feather and plumes were caught until almost nothing left. Or like during the second year of the great undertaking, Tujue's Qimin entered the imperial court. In order to show off his wealth, Yang Guang ordered to have the previous dynasty's younger generations to act as his family members; unexpectedly he enlisted more than thirty thousand people in the imperial court. And when he did not have enough officers and men, we were forced to do it. In reality, we are also victims."

And then he let out a cold snort and said, "But now the situation is reversed. We no longer have to listen to his order."

Kou Zhong frowned and said, "You shouldn't have listened to his order to begin with!"

"But if we did not do it, someone else would, and the outcome would not be much different," Xiang Yushan argued, "And inevitably our Baling Bang would have immediately fallen from power."

"So what do you want from us now?" Xu Ziling asked.

Xiang Yushan smiled apologetically, "That day Xiaodi had eyes but failed to recognize Mount Tai; turns out two gentlemen are important characters whose names shook the Jianghu recently. Currently I am under Er Dangjia [second master, see also Book 3 Chapter 8 on Ren Meimei] Xiao Xian's order to come specifically to explore the possibilities of mutual cooperation."

Kou Zhong laughed in spite of himself, "You are too polite. Turns out you are also after that treasure, which we basically don't know anything about."

Xu Ziling sneered and said, "You might as well not explain it. Right now the rumor is spreading around everywhere; what was false has become the truth. Who would believe that we really don't know the treasure's whereabouts?"

"Gentlemen are wrong," Xiang Yushan said with serious expression, "From the start Xiao Er Dangjia did not believe that you know the treasure's whereabouts."

The three people could only stare blankly.

Susu knitted her eyebrows and said, “Then why did you take the risk to find my two Didi? For what?”

Xiang Yushan lowered his voice, “That is, of course, for the account book!”

Immediately Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other. Other than people from the Li Clan and the Yuwen Clan, who would know that the account book was in the two boys’ possession?

Xiang Yushan smiled and said, “Just by looking at gentlemen’s expression, I knew that Er Dangjia’s belief is not bad. I, Xiang Yushan, had no choice but to prostrate myself in admiration. Right now the whole world is being led by the nose by two gentlemen.”

In full alert, Kou Zhong swept his gaze around the small dumpling restaurant, he sternly said, “So you are going to rob the account book from us!”

“How could Xiaodi dare?” Xiang Yushan hastily said, “Since Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong were able to snatch the account book from Yuwen Chengdu’s hand, and were able to elude Yuwen Clan’s pursuit, plus you were able to inflict injury to Yuwen Wudi, how could Xiaodi have the guts to provoke the tiger? I am only here on behalf of our humble gang to discuss the conditions of our cooperation.”

And then he continued surreptitiously, “Don’t gentlemen wish to bring down Yuwen Huaji? He also happens to be our humble gang’s number one enemy.”

[1] The word ‘Miss’ here is ‘guniang’, not ‘xiaojie’ like the one they used to refer to Susu’s boss, Zhai Jiao. The easiest explanation would be: ‘xiaojie’ (miss) is the counterpart of ‘shaoye’ (young master), while ‘guniang’ (miss) is the counterpart of ‘gongzi’ (young master). Am I confusing you?

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were dumbstruck. It was half a day later that the former let out a cold air and said, “You, this kid, are indeed very well-informed.”

Xiang Yushan smiled and said, "Over the years, we, under different names, have opened more than two hundred pleasure houses and close to three hundred casinos, big and small, across the country, and hence have established a vast investigative network. Whatever matter we want to investigate, naturally it is relatively easier for us to do than other people."

Xu Ziling said, "But I am afraid you won't get any information about Yuwen Clan by visiting brothel and playing in the casino!"

Xiang Yushan nodded, "That's a fact," he simply said.

Kou Zhong knew that he was not going to speak up; greatly intrigued, he asked, "Why would you want to deal with Yuwen Huaji?"

Xiang Yushan's countenance showed grief and indignation; hanging his head low he said, "Fifteen days ago, our humble gang's Da Dangjia [first master] Lu Kangshou met the 'shadow assassin' and lost his life. According to our investigation, the biggest suspect is someone from Yuwen Clan. We must avenge this enmity no matter what."

The three people suddenly understood; no wonder he kept saying Er Dangjia Xiao Xian this and Er Dangjia Xiao Xian that. Turned out this matter involved some complex political power struggle, so naturally Xiang Yushan was unwilling to casually tell them.

Xiang Yushan said in low voice, "Our San Dangjia [third master] is leaning toward Yuwen Clan people. After the incident, Er Dangjia already sent our in-house law enforcement people to take care of him. We were also able to extract from his mouth the information that Yuwen Huaji and that incapable ruler are related to this matter."

"That Yuwen Huaji really made a blunder this time!" Xu Ziling said, "He should have eliminated your precious gang's Er Dangjia as well."

Xiang Yushan let out a cold snort and said, "Do you think he didn't think about that? It's just that they did not know the level of Xiao Er Dangjia's real skill. He

has actually surpassed Da Dangjia early on, only it was kept a secret. Although the shadow assassin was formidable, he failed to take his life; furthermore, Er Dangjia pretended to be dead to lure San Dangjia to reveal his true colors. Otherwise, our gang would have fallen into Yuwen thieves and San Dangjia's hands early on."

"Who was that shadow assassin?" Susu asked in wonder.

"That person's identity is still a mystery," Xiang Yushan replied, "It is rumored that he is still very young, perhaps he belongs to the imperial family, specializing in assassinating those who are unpleasant to the fatuous monarch's eyes. His favorite is making his move in assassinating the target during full moons. Even Du Fuwei nearly suffered a major setback."

The two boys let out a mouthful of cold air. If this assassin had the guts to target Du Fuwei, the level of his formidability should be easy to determine.

Xiang Yushan took out a letter from his bosom and said, "To show our humble gang's sincerity in proposing this collaboration, Xiao Er Dangjia specifically wrote a letter, in his letter he pledged a heavy oath that he won't be just like others who only want to exploit two gentlemen, but afterwards mean harm to you. After two gentlemen read this, you will understand, but please destroy this letter immediately."

Kou Zhong received the letter, opened it and read. Sure enough, Xiao Xian put it in black and white that he swore a heavy oath; in addition, he put his personal seal on it. After passing the letter to Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong sighed and said, "Your Er Dangjia must be a powerful, capable and broad-minded man. Hey! Now he ought to be the Da Dangjia."

"No!" Xiang Yushan replied, "He is still Er Dangjia. Unless that muddle-headed ruler is dead, he is unwilling to take the Da Dangjia position."

Xu Ziling handed the letter over to Susu; he said in low voice, "What do you want us to do? Is it to hand the account book over to you? We can't do that!"

Xiang Yushan received the letter back from Susu; using his internal strength he

rubbed it until it turned to powder, and then he said with a laugh, "Of course not. We will ask two gentlemen to kindly participate in this matter, enjoying the delight of watching that incapable ruler and Yuwen Clan fighting against each other. As soon as two gentlemen nod your head, I will immediately make arrangement for you. Hey! The three of you ought to leave this place in secret [orig. 'gods do not know, ghosts do not detect']."

And then he chuckled softly and said, "Shen Luoyan and two gentlemen don't get along too well!"

Susu was shocked. "We can't leave now," she said, "We must wait for Laoye's return before we could leave."

Surprisingly Xiang Yushan did not even ask why; he simply nodded and said, "So be it. Whenever you are ready to leave, just come to Daiqing Yuan [lit. 'greenish-black mascara' courtyard] in here, and tell them you want to see Peipei, someone will definitely contact you, and will arrange everything."

With a loud laughter he stood up, and cheerfully said, "When I first met two gentlemen, I already felt we are of kindred spirits, and now we have the opportunity to work together."

And then facing Susu, he raised his cupped fist and said, "I do hope to see Miss very soon." Finished speaking, he simply left.

The three of them 'you look at me, I look at you'; momentarily they did not know what to say.

Although they had the account book in their possession, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were still hazy and did not have clear plan on how to actually used it to harm Yuwen Huaji. Now that this matter has turned for the better, they were happy, but were also anxious that it would not be as simple as Xiang Yushan said.

Seeing Susu's pretty eyes slightly blushed, Xu Ziling pondered a bit. Astounded, he said, "Does Su Jie like that guy?"

Susu was greatly displeased, “Stop talking nonsense!”

Kou Zhong said, “This guy is a world-class expert in patting the horse’s bottom, the words that come out of his mouth, not even half a sentence will not make people happy, and when he sees something good, he knows how to get it at once. Coaxing girls, he is even more formidable. Su Jie must not fall into his trap.”

Susu was greatly embarrassed; standing up, she said, “You still want to stroll down the street?”

Whenever the two boys went, there would always be people spying on them, so they could not help feeling anxious for Xiang Yushan. But since this man possessed great magical power that he was able to find them under these circumstances, he must also have his own way to evade surveillance.

When they returned to the Big Boss Mansion, Tu Shufang berated them for going out without telling him first. The two boys humbly asked for forgiveness, hence this matter was dropped just like that.

The two boys started to examine the account book in details. They found out that the records were mainly on Li Clan and Yuwen Clan’s arms acquisition from Dong Ming Pai: the type and quantity, the time and place of the delivery, and so on. The records were quite exhaustive, and most of the transactions happened in the last two years or so. If it fell into Yang Guang’s hands, and he did not suspect that they were going to rebel, it would be strange indeed.

That night after dinner, the two boys had a secret meeting in Xu Ziling’s room.

Xu Ziling probed, “Looks like for the time being we cannot go to Luoyang.”

“Going sooner or later is not the problem” Kou Zhong said, “If it is our destiny, we will obtain the treasure. After the Jade Annulus of He Clan is in our hands, we can head to Chang’an and try our luck to find the Duke Yang Treasure. If both are successful, we will recruit soldiers and buy horses. At that time, I want to see who would be able to strive against us, the Two Dragons of Yangzhou?”

Xu Ziling sighed, "You are thinking too far," he said, "Right now I am worried about Su Jie. The scariest thing for me is that Baling Bang would abduct her and use her to threaten us. Don't look at right now that Xiang guy is taking our insult and our curses with a smiling face; just think about ever since we came out to travel around the country, from those who we met, how many are really good people?"

Kou Zhong also frowned. Right now Susu could be considered their only family, no matter what they could not let her be hurt.

"We have to be more careful," Xu Ziling continued, "After avenging Niang, we'll bring Susu Jie to the south, find a place to settle her down, and only then can we think about any fun thing to do and how to earn a living."

There was a knock on the door followed by Susu pushing the door open and storming in. "Miss is back. She wants to see you right away," she said in panic.

The two boys groaned inwardly. What the fear the most right now was precisely to see this Big Miss of Zhai family, whose appearance and temperament were so ugly.

Zhai Jiao's face, which was as black as the bottom of an earthen pot, looked tense and jittery, her eyes flickered with cold rays; with one hand on her as-thick-as-a-chamber-pot waist and the other hand pointing at them, she cursed, "I was out for five days, and you are already rebelling. You have the cheek to sneak out and stroll around the entire day before coming back. If anything bad happened, how am I going to explain to Die? Now I have reported everything to Die, he said that no matter what you are not allowed to leave the Mansion for even half a step. Wait for his return and then we'll talk."

Kou Zhong mused, 'Wherever Laozi [I, your father] wants to go, it's none of your, this b1tch's, d@mn business.' But of course he did not dare to say it out loud. Smiling apologetically, he said, "It's our, two slave materials, fault; would Miss please calm down."

Zhai Jiao pulled back her thick finger that was pointing at the two boys. She spoke harshly, "Other than Susu, does anybody else know about this matter?"

With a straight face and a voice full of incomparable confidence Kou Zhong replied, "Of course not."

Xu Ziling added, "Since Miss has seen Da Longtou, you should know that we did not lie to you!"

With a hint of frustration in her voice, Zhai Jiao angrily said, "Die did not say anything, except that he will be home as soon as possible. He also commanded that this matter must be kept secret. I have already warned Susu, now I am warning you, these two slave materials."

The two boys were already accustomed to her throwing a tantrum; hence they could only let her shouting and cursing.

Zhai Jiao vented her anger a while longer. But then she suddenly said, "Do you want women to accompany you for the night?"

"What?!?" the two boys' voice cracked.

Zhai Jiao's temper cooled down somewhat; her voice was softer as she said, "Die told me that you are free to pick any women you fancy among the maids to keep you company at night. And when he is back, there will be other rewards as well."

Kou Zhong was very tempted, but then he remembered that if he did that, what would the difference between he and Wang Bodang be?

Xu Ziling resolutely refused, "Thank you for Da Longtou's good intention, but we two brothers definitely cannot accept it."

As if relieved from a burden, Zhai Jiao said, "You don't want it, that is the best. Who would want to accompany you, two little demons anyway?"

The two boys were infuriated, but they had no choice but to keep silent.

After staring hard at the two boys for quite a while, Zhai Jiao told them to get lost. As if they had just received the emperor's amnesty, they hastily slipped away.

Book 4 Chapter 10 – Revenge And Repaying Debts Of Gratitude

Recalling that they would soon go to Jiangdu to seek revenge against Yuwen Huaji, the two boys were even more dedicated in training martial art.

The weather gradually turned colder, by the time the first Great Snow [21st of the 24 solar terms, December 7 – 21] arrived, report of victory also arrived. Sui generals Liu Changgong, leading twenty-five thousand strong cavalry, advanced from Luoyang to the east, to rendezvous with Pei Renji's forces from Hulao [Tiger Cage], and proceed together in joint forces to the south, ready to annihilate Wagang troops in one fell swoop.

Who would have thought that Li Mi's spy found out about this, and immediately opened the Storehouse door to feed the people, and thus he bought the people's heart, so that he won the citizens of all counties in the vicinity before together with Zhai Rang led their forces to engage the enemy.

Li Mi divided his elite troops into ten teams. He himself led four teams to set an ambush from across the mountain range, while Zhai Rang's six teams were arrayed in battle formation on the eastern bank of River Shizi, a tributary of River Luo, waiting for the enemy.

Liu Changgong's main forces arrived first. Seeing Wagang Army's small number, he thought that during the battle to attack Luokuo, the enemy suffered heavy casualties. Unexpectedly, without giving his own troops some time to rest and eat, he drove his forces across the river to attack, forgetting his agreement to join forces with Pei Renji.

Sure enough, Zhai Rang's forces suffered defeat and retreated.

Having tasted the sweet victory, Liu Changgong tucked his tail and pursued. His troops immediately fell into Li Mi's ambush. Liu Changgong's weary and hungry troops were routed completely, countless casualties fell that day. Liu Changgong's defeated remnants slipped back to Luoyang.

Learning about Liu forces' defeat, Pei Renji did not dare to proceed alone. He withdrew to Baihua [lit. hundreds of flower] Valley and setup a fortress there, no longer dare to go out to war.

Thereupon Wagang Army's prestige was greatly boosted.

Because the victory this time was due to Li Mi's brilliant strategy, his popularity was like the sun in the middle of the sky.

Inside the city of Xingyang there was gaiety everywhere; incessant sound of firecrackers filled the air.

And then heavy snow fell for several days. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's childish heart was greatly aroused; they built snowmen in the garden for fun. Seeing they were having so much fun, several pretty maids were emboldened to join in. The two boys had never had girls playing with them; they were beside themselves with joy.

Kou Zhong and the bunch of pretty maids bumped into each other, sometimes he took advantage by intentionally bumping onto them; he was extremely delighted.

One of the pretty maids was quite cute, her face was especially pretty; in term of beauty, she was only a tad below Susu. But her figure was alluring, plus she was particularly provocative, teasing Kou Zhong relentlessly, so that his heart was unbearably itchy.

As soon as he had the chance, he came to Xu Ziling and said, "I can't stand that girl's teasing anymore. Since Zhai Jiao does not mind me hooking up with her

maid, if I can have her for a night of passion, you won't oppose me, will you?"

Xu Ziling knew his character very well; if he wanted something, he would not be content before obtaining it. Thereupon he whispered, "What if she gets pregnant?"

Kou Zhong was stunned. "Can't be that easy!" he said, "Others have been married for many years, yet a lot of them still do not have any child."

Xu Ziling said, "If you want it, you do it yourself! But remember that she is the daughter of a good family, you must not abandon her without any reason!"

'Pow!' a snowball was thrown right on target, making Kou Zhong's face fully covered in snow.

Chuchu [lit. cute/lovely] and the other five pretty maids cried excitedly, "Bull's eye! Bull's eye!"

Kou Zhong leaned over to Xu Ziling's side and said, "Xiongdi is right, but I can always kiss and stroke their face!" Finished speaking he opened his arms wide and shouted, "Whoever got caught, the punishment is a kiss on the mouth!"

The pretty maids immediately scattered in all directions in fright. Kou Zhong identified Chuchu clearly, and then ran toward her.

Watching Kou Zhong and the girls laughing and playing and chasing each other on the snow, Xu Ziling's heart was overwhelmed with emotions.

In the past, when they could not guarantee three square meals a day in Yangzhou, who could have imagined that today they were able to play and have fun with the pretty maids of Big Boss Zhai Rang's mansion?

'Pow!' the back of Xu Ziling's head was hit; the snow slipped into his collar that his neck was icy-cold.

Based on his current eyes and ears, it should be very easy to dodge, but somehow he lost interest. Recalling Kou Zhong's remark about 'kissing and stroking their face', his heart grew warm. He turned around and gave another beautiful maid a chase.

The beautiful maid was straining herself that her jade cheek turned rosy like red clouds. Whether intentionally or otherwise, she ran toward the cluster of trees nearby; how could Xu Ziling not understand her intention? He was about to run after her and take some advantage like Kou Zhong, suddenly a shadow flashed; Tu Shufang blocked his path.

"Da Longtou is back," he said solemnly, "He wants to see you immediately."

Struggling to control themselves, the two boys went into the inner courtyard where Zhai Rang resided. They saw the people guarding the door were all unfamiliar faces; every one of them had their Taiyang [sun] acupoint [on the temples] bulging high. With just one look they knew that these people were all martial art masters.

It was the first time that the two boys set foot on this part of the mansion. Along the way a forty-something scholar came out to meet them, and politely said, "Zaixia Wang Ruxin, Minister of War. Two Xiao Xiongdi please follow the Ol' Wang, Tu Zongguan may go back."

Tu Shufang was slightly taken aback. Wang Ruxin already led the two boys toward Zhai Rang's living room.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were not the little kids of the former days who lacked Jianghu experience; upon unleashing the power of their eyes and ears, they detected that the surrounding area was heavily guarded. There were warriors spread around the forest beyond the two-story building, the situation was as if they were about to face a powerful enemy. The two boys could not help but wonder.

Wang Ruxin led them to the door of the inner residence's opened-wide front door, where he stopped and said, "Da Longtou is waiting for you, two gentlemen please come in on your own."

The two boys thought that it would not be appropriate to discuss such a secret affair in front of other people, hence they did not suspect anything; stepping forward, they entered the hall.

The man guarding the door immediately closed the door behind them.

‘Bang!’ As they heard the sound of the double-door closing up behind them, the two boys saw a tall, slim, as straight as a ramrod, middle age man with beautiful beard, was pacing back and forth in the hall with hands behind his back. When he heard the door closing, he turned his head toward the two boys, his eyes flashing with energy; not at all looked like someone who was suffering an internal injury.

The man had a grand appearance, with a long hawk-like nose, making his expression gloomy and heavy, giving the impression that he was a man with heavy responsibility, but at the same time also gave the impression that he was a selfish and ruthless man.

The hair on his temples ash-grey, his forehead narrow and wrinkled, looking as if it was portraying the difficult times that has come and gone over the years.

After the two boys saluted respectfully, Zhai Rang said, “Have you seen me?”

Kou Zhong hurriedly replied, “At that time we were hiding on the beam, and did not dare to look. Considering Da Longtou come and go like the wind, we did not see Da Longtou.”

Zhai Rang’s eye turned toward the window, as he gazed at the snow-covered winter landscape, he said flatly, “Then how can you be sure that that person was me?”

Xu Ziling replied, “That was after the fact; we heard Zu Junyan and that strange man who hid inside the trunk mentioned it.”

Undisturbed, Zhai Rang said, “Did you see that strange man?”

“Only a glance,” Kou Zhong replied, “His figure imposing, compared to Zu Junyan he was at least half a head taller. However, because he was wearing mask, we could not see what he looked like.”

Zhai Rang was visibly shaken. “What did his voice sound like?” he asked coldly.

“Very gentle and pleasant to hear,” Kou Zhong promptly replied, “After he finished speaking, it seemed to me that his voice still lingered in the air.”

Zhai Rang’s chest sharply moved up and down several times. After a long time of silence he finally let out a stifled grunt and said, “What is exactly your school, your sect? How did your inner power become so strange that you were able to evade that strange man and my eyes and ears?”

Kou Zhong happily said, “Turns out the one we saw was indeed Da Longtou. Da Longtou is really formidable. That strange man said that he injured you! Turns out he was just tooting his horn.”

Zhai Rang coldly said, “You have not answered my question.”

Xu Ziling said, “Our martial art was taught by Niang, but Niang has died.”

“Good!” Zhai Rang said in heavy voice.

The two boys were greatly surprised. As he heard that their Niang has died, why did he applaud?

Right this moment, Zhai Rang made his move. In the blink of an eye he was already in front of the two boys; both of his sleeves rose up together.

The two boys had never imagined that someone with his status would suddenly mount a sneak attack. They saw his hands came out from inside his sleeves, with an astonishing power his palms struck onto their bodies. There was not enough time for them to block.

The two boys cried out in shock and flew backward.

‘Bang! Bang!’ Zhai Rang’s two palms separately landed on the pit of the two boys’ stomach.

A blast of strong, violent, and hard to resist qi power penetrated their body from the chest. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling immediately spurted out a mouthful of blood, as their bodies were lifted off the ground and flew down. ‘Thump! Thump!’ their backs crashed onto the wall on the left and right of the door, slipped down along the wall, and finally landed sitting down on the floor.

The pain was so severe that they felt their five viscera [i.e. heart, liver, spleen, lungs and kidneys] were about to burst, their qi and blood surged over, they no longer had any strength left to fight.

Who would have thought that Zhai Rang was actually more shocked than the two boys? He originally thought that with one palm strike he would be able to send them back to the Western Paradise, but to his surprise, as his strike hit the opponents’ chests, he felt two jolts of reacting forces, one cold and one hot, coming out of the pit of their stomachs. Not only these forces neutralized most of his own power, the forces also entered his body, sapping his strength that he could not even apply his inner power.

Although Kou Zhong lost the strength in his entire body, he could still open his mouth to shout, “You ... what are you doing?”

Zhai Rang’s eyes flashed with ominous glint. “Shut up!” he said, “You can only blame yourselves for knowing things that you are not supposed to know.” And he stepped toward the two boys.

Xu Ziling rolled over to embrace Kou Zhong, he said, “If we are to die, let’s die together!”

While casting a sidelong glance, Kou Zhong embraced Xu Ziling and whispered in his ear, “Circulate your energy! I’ll distract him.”

Meanwhile Zhai Rang has arrived in front of the two boys; suddenly he let out a dry cough, and with a hoarse cold laugh said, “Just let Ol’ Zhai fulfill your wish!”

The two boys were crying inwardly, saying goodbye to the world, while Zhai Rang’s palms landed on the tianling acupoint on the top of their heads.

A loud crash severely shook their brains, their vision turned black, but immediately they regained their consciousness.

While pondering whether they had arrived at the gate of hell, they found out that they were still sitting on the floor in the main hall. When their mind cleared up, they saw it was Zhai Rang who fell prostrate on top of their bodies; his face blue and his lips black, his entire body, from head to toe, trembled.

The two boys were keen; they immediately realized that Zhai Rang had indeed received serious internal injury, only he suppressed it down, acting as if nothing had happened. Presently, in order to kill the two boys, he rushed his true qi indiscriminately, so that his internal injury flared out, in turn it rendered him useless like this.

Kou Zhong pushed Zhai Rang’s body and rolled him over on the floor. Stroking his chest he moaned, “This guy’s palm power is really formidable. Xiao Ling, how are you feeling?”

Xu Ziling was still sitting on the floor. Massaging his chest, he said, “Is everybody in the world only know how to bite the hand that feed him? Both father and daughter are just like that.”

Kou Zhong said, “Right now escaping is more important, we must circulate our energy to treat our injury. Oh!” He shuddered.

With a bitter smile Xu Ziling said, “You are cold as hell, but I am unbearably hot. My five viscera and six bowels feel like on fire.”

Suddenly they both were shaken, as if they came to realization together, and looked at each other with great delight.

Kou Zhong pulled himself together, raised both his palms and said, “You send your true qi from your right palm into the hollow of my palm, and I will send my true qi from my right palm into your body. Ha! This is our original creation on how to heal our injury.”

Without slightest hesitation Xu Ziling quickly raised his palm according to Kou Zhong’s instruction, circulating his power and transferring his qi. At first it was still extremely painful and very difficult. From time to time they still vomited wisps of blood, but soon cold and hot streams were flowing together; round and round the streams cycled inside their bodies, continuously without any break.

They did not know that this kind of blending of cold and hot stream had actually saved these two boys’ little lives.

What happened was that although the two boys unwittingly achieved success in training the qi-circulating technique from one of the diagrams in the ‘Secret to Long Life’, their result actually tended to be too cold or too hot. During the initial phase, this matter did not pose any problem. However, as the qi inside their bodies started to build up, they were approaching the critical stage where ‘too much is as bad as not enough’. If this condition continued, inevitably they would suffer fire deviation. In the ‘too cold’ situation, their meridian would freeze and congeal, and they die. In the ‘too hot’ situation, their yueyong [lit. moon forever] channel would burst and they perish.

Therefore, in critical moment this time the two boys mutually transferring the true qi from his own body to treat the other’s injury, because the source of their true qi was identical, it was tantamount to the two boys separately cultivating their internal energy, hence the two streams of qi merged together; not only it has greatly accelerated the progress of their cultivation, it has also brought up the miraculous result of the ‘Secret to Long Life’, which most people had never even dreamed about.

If it were someone else, even if that person’s talent was better than these two boys’, by the time he reached the last two diagrams, he could forget about obtaining any result without spending eight or ten years.

Deviating from the norm, the two boys have always trained separately, plus

they did not understand how to blend the cold and the hot; therefore, contrary to expectation, they achieved the very purest result instead. Now that they blended with one another, it was as if individually they gained two-year worth of maturity.

Up to this point, the two boys' success was only a small part of the 'Secret to Long Life', but now they no longer deviate from the norm.

Nobody knew how much time has passed; the two boys' pain was gone. Although they still felt weak due to the blood loss, their spirit was very much alive; their senses and their mind were much keener than before.

Zhai Rang was still lying on the floor, but he no longer shivered, his countenance looked much better than before.

Kou Zhong withdrew his palms and said in low voice, "Do you want to get rid of this ingratitude [lit. forget favors and violate justice] fellow first?"

Xu Ziling sighed and said, "If we do that, Su Jie will never forgive us. Hey! Your cold true qi felt very comfortable to me. That's strange! Why does my tianling acupoint feel like it opens wide, and a cold stream flowing continuously inside? The tip of my tongue also tastes sweet."

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "And my yongquan acupoint is steaming hot. Come! Let's go, we must find Su Jie."

Xu Ziling followed his lead and stood up. After looking cautiously at Zhai Rang on the floor, he whispered, "There are so many people outside; what should we do?"

Kou Zhong said, "It seems like they do not know what happened here yet; we'll change according to the situation."

Steeling himself, Xu Ziling pushed the door open and walked out.

Wang Ruxin was waiting outside the door. Seeing the two boys came out, his

countenance became very strange; his mouth agape and he was speechless.

Looking at his expression, the two boys knew that he was aware that Zhai Rang was going to kill them to shut their mouths. Hence when he saw the two boys strutting outside, alive and well, his face became ridiculously weird.

Kou Zhong beamed in smile; pointing to his own noggin, he said, “After listening to our story, Da Longtou knew there was some misunderstanding. But it has created new anxiety on him, so he told us to leave so that he could think quietly. He said nobody is allowed to come in and thus interrupt his train of thought.”

This was Kou Zhong’s brilliance; knowing that Wang Ruxin understood the inside information, he used it against him.

Xu Ziling gently closed the door, and while Wang Ruxin still did not know what to do, he ran after Kou Zhong, swaggering out of that place.

As soon as they were out of the inner courtyard, the two boys rushed toward Zhai Jiao’s personal quarter.

Kou Zhong said, “It would be best if we could sneak out with Su Jie and immediately go to Daiqing Yuan to find that Peipei that Yiqi Shan [see Book 3 Chapter 7] was talking about. Otherwise, if we are late by half a step, people might chop us to pieces.”

Xu Ziling was exceptionally cool-headed; he said in a low voice, “I feel that my power has doubled; maybe I can jump over the city wall. But if I have to carry Su Jie, I don’t have any confidence. To be honest, until now I am still not sure if Yiqi Shan really has yiqi [reminder: spirit of loyalty, code of brotherhood].”

Kou Zhong said, “Our matter is as urgent as a horse running on the field, we’ll borrow Yiqi Shan’s bridge first; whether after crossing the bridge we’d pull the plank out or not, we’ll think about it later.”

By this time the two boys have arrived at the main gate of Zhai Jiao’s

courtyard. One of the four guards at the door shouted, “Did Miss summon you?”

With a pained expression Kou Zhong whispered, “Were it not for her order, would you be willing to come see her?”

The guards all smiled knowingly. The two boys swaggered inside. That beautiful maid Chuchu happened to pass by inside the residence. Tugging at her sleeve Kou Zhong said with an embarrassed smile, “Beautiful, how are you? Do you know where Su Jie is?”

Chuchu’s powdered face blushed slightly, casting a sidelong glance at him she snapped, “You are not looking for me, how should I know where she is?”

Flinging his hand, she took a few steps forward before turning her head back and with a sweet smile said, “Su Jie is serving Miss! Dummy!” Finished speaking, she covered her laughing mouth with her sleeve, and then gracefully walked away.

Noticing that at a moment like this Kou Zhong was still watching her in daze, he pulled him, hard. Kou Zhong came to his senses and followed Xu Ziling toward the door.

Before they saw the person, Zhai Jiao’s unpleasant voice was already heard, as she said angrily, “I don’t know what trick Die is playing, I only said a few words and he immediately wanted to see you, these two little demons. Didn’t I already tell him everything? He should have let me to be present to listen to you.”

Kou Zhong rolled his eyes. Stepping into the hall, he cupped his fist and respectfully said, “Da Longtou asked Miss to come see him. He also said he has a gift for Miss!”

Even Xu Ziling had to admire Kou Zhong’s quick wit.

Zhai Jiao was sitting in a chair inside, while Susu was standing by her side with a blank expression on her face. Hearing Kou Zhong, “Ah!” she exclaimed, and stood up and rushed out, stormed between the two boys, and darted out the

door.

The two boys were overjoyed at this unexpected turn of events. They bolted forward to grab the shocked Susu from left and right.

“Don’t ask,” Kou Zhong urgently said, “If we don’t leave now, I am afraid we won’t have the chance forever.”

Susu’s countenance suddenly changed; her eyes were fixed at the door. The two boys hurriedly turned their head around, immediately their soul flew away and scattered, while in their heart they were continuously calling for their Niang.

Book 4 Chapter 11 – Night Visit To The Pleasure House

Zhai Rang, alone, stood in the middle of the door, staring coldly at the three people.

Susu also felt that Zhai Rang was greatly different from usual; with a trembling voice she called out, “Laoye!”

The two boys let off Susu and stood in front of her, preparing to fight to the death.

Zhai Rang’s countenance was back to normal, but it looked like he had aged by several years. With hands behind his back he slowly walked toward a chair, sat down, and spoke with soft voice, “Susu, go inside, I want to speak with your two Didi.”

Obedying him, Susu was about to move, but Kou Zhong pulled her back; he said in heavy voice, “How do we know that you don’t have people waiting in the back for Su Jie.”

Seeing Kou Zhong was so rude toward her old master, Susu was so scared that the blood drained from her jade countenance.

With a cold sneer Zhai Rang said, “With just one order from me, do you think you will still be alive? There is no need for me to take you into my consideration.”

Susu implored the two boys in low voice, “Please just listen to Laoye!” Shaking

off Kou Zhong's hand, she wobbled inside.

The two boys exchanged some glances, and then both of them sat in front of Zhai Rang.

Zhai Rang sized up the two boys in silence. Suddenly he said, "Who is your Niang?"

Xu Ziling opened his mouth, he coldly replied, "That is our secret."

Zhai Rang flashed an angry look at first, but then it was as if his anger dissipated. "Forget about it!" he said, "Just now you had the chance, but did not make your move to kill me. No matter how shameless or how despicable, I, Zhai Rang, will not make my second move! Previously I wanted to kill you to shut your mouth, I was indeed had no choice due to a predicament. It's finished! Everything is finished. I wanted to kill you because of my recurrent acute injury, it's Laotian [Heaven] punishing me for repaying kindness with evil, I am the one to blame for inviting trouble for myself!"

Looking at this once all-powerful [orig. 'rebuking Heaven and Earth'] figure under this 'all path exhausted, the road ended' situation, the two boys were at a loss.

Xu Ziling said, "Da Longtou is back from great victory; even though Zu Junyan is in cahoots with outsiders, can't Da Longtou give your order and have those renegades' head fall to the ground?"

Zhai Rang shook his head and sighed. He slowly said, "Inside situation really must not be discussed with outsiders. Right now Ol' Zhai only have one request, I wish two gentlemen can stay here ten days longer. After ten days, I will send people to escort you and Susu out."

"Die!" Zhai Jiao's voice was heard from the door, "You said you wanted to see daughter, why did you sneak up here instead?"

Zhai Rang looked at Wang Ruxin who came with Zhai Jiao, he said, "Notify

Duke Mi immediately, I want to have an emergency meeting in Longtou Mansion immediately.”

Everybody was stunned.

Xu Ziling was lying on the bed. Kou Zhong was pacing back and forth in the room. Both had their eyebrows knitted deeply, they were completely baffled. Why did Zhai Rang want to kill them to shut their mouth? According to reason, he ought to be grateful to them for providing him with such useful information.

Xu Ziling slapped the bed and said, “It must be this: the mastermind behind Zu Junyan must be Li Mi, that’s why old Zhai is having such a headache.”

Kou Zhong sat on the bed; he mused, “But he does not have to kill us. The guy who plotted against the old Zhai was wearing a mask, and he was hiding inside the trunk to make his move, naturally it was because he was afraid Old Zhai would recognize him. Based on Old Zhai’s skill, the number of people who are qualified to plot against him cannot be too many; so who could it be?”

The two boys were severely shaken at the same time; they looked at each other.

Trembling with excitement, Kou Zhong said, “Are you thinking what I am thinking?”

Xu Ziling sat up, his eyes showed a horrorstruck expression, “Must be Li Mi!” he whispered.

Kou Zhong took a deep breath. “This is bad,” he said, “Old Zhai summoned Li Mi to have a meeting, obviously he is going to reveal his last card; won’t he bring disaster to us and Su Jie? Speaking about scheming skill, old Zhai is not Li Mi’s match, especially now that he is injured so bad that he could not even kill us.”

“It would be best for us to slip away as soon as possible,” Xu Ziling said, “But I know that there is a chance that Su Jie has heard Old Zhai’s remark that we are to stay ten more days before we can leave.”

Kou Zhong said, “We’d better go to Daiqing Yuan [see Book 4 Chapter 9] first to get to the bottom of it. When we slip away in the future, it will be a lot more convenient; besides, if we stay ten more days, won’t we find out what’s going on?”

Xu Ziling said, “But right now we have more martial art masters coming back with that Old Zhai, getting in and out will be very inconvenient.”

Kou Zhong said, “Old Zhai did not say that we cannot stroll down the street. We can just strut down the main gate and test their reaction.”

Xu Ziling sprang up from the bed. They were about to go when from Kou Zhong’s adjoining room they heard knocks on the door.

“Who’s looking for me?” Kou Zhong whispered, “It’s already late.”

Soon afterwards the knocks moved onto Xu Ziling’s door, followed by a sweet voice calling out, “Kou Zhong! Kou Zhong!”

Kou Zhong stared blankly. “It’s Chuchu!” he said, “Really bad!” He jumped; first three steps, and then two steps, and finally pulled the door open.

Seeing Kou Zhong, Chuchu’s eyebrows rose up in delight; her gaze flitted over Kou Zhong’s broad shoulders and she stole a glance toward Xu Ziling as she reached out to grab Kou Zhong’s sleeve and pull him out.

It was quite some time later that Kou Zhong returned, red-faced. Wiping his mouth, he said, “The passion is really fierce, she also wanted to pull me into her room. This must not be the first time for her, otherwise she would not be able to teach me how to do things right like just now.”

Xu Ziling was horrified, “Did you really f*ck her?”

“Get lost!” Kou Zhong snapped, “Just kiss on the mouth, and stroking her fragrant shoulders! Our business is more important, let’s go!”

Side-by-side the two boys left the courtyard of their living quarters, and walked toward the main gate.

Flakes of snow were falling down from the sky like floating feathers, the moon and the stars did not show their light, the air was thick with an impenetrable feeling of tranquility, they met several mansion guards along the way, but nobody stopped them.

When they reached the plaza in front of the main entrance, Tu Shufang caught up with them from behind. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"The boredom is driving us crazy," Kou Zhong replied, "We want to go out to have a stroll!"

Tu Shufang cordially joined them, he accompanied them going through the main gate and onto the street. He asked in low voice, "When you see Da Longtou today, what actually happened?"

The two boys did not really know how to answer; hence momentarily they were at a loss for words.

There were very few people on the street; those they encountered were passers-by who curled up shivering while walking hurriedly to get out of the cold winter breeze, in stark contrast to the three men's heavy gaits, giving the impression that they were moving in sluggish, slow-motion steps.

Tu Shufang sighed and said, "Da Longtou is really injured, isn't he?"

The two boys nodded blankly.

Tu Shufang continued, "Did Da Longtou say who was that man who mounted a sneak attack on him?"

Kou Zhong shook his head, "He did not say, but we were guessing it was Li Mi."

Tu Shufang was severely shaken; he was pondering in silence.

Xu Ziling looked around. Tu Shufang said, “Don’t bother, I guarantee nobody dares to follow you. Shen Luoyan does not have that kind of guts.”

Kou Zhong was shocked. “When did that b1tch return?” he asked.

“Just yesterday,” Tu Shufang replied. And then he continued, “I have long suspected Li Mi. His only apprehension is precisely Da Longtou’s martial art skill. These last half a year were indeed not good for Da Longtou; not only he had to pretend that he is not injured, he had to fight war on all sides. Were it not for this, Li Mi would have rebelled early on, then it would really be a great loss for Da Longtou.”

Kou Zhong seized this opportunity to ask, “Da Longtou must have determined that the person who wounded him must be Li Mi; he summoned him to have a meeting, was it because he wanted to kill him?”

Tu Shufang shook his head, “Ever since Zhang Xutuo’s defeat, they have been on guard against each other. Unless it’s a direct confrontation, nobody will be able to take advantage over the other. Ay! Each time Li Mi wins a battle, Da Longtou’s position suffers one big shaking, sending us into a situation where we take a complete beating. Most of the high-ranking military officers secretly express their loyalty and devotion to Li Mi only. Now that Da Longtou is injured, we don’t have any asset with which we are going to confront Li Mi.”

Xu Ziling said, “In that case, why not urging Da Longtou to avoid the problem by walking away from it? He could go someplace else and lay another foundations; it will definitely be better than staying here, waiting to be slaughtered by others.”

Tu Shufang halted his steps; he let out a wry smile and said, “This matter has to be decided by Da Longtou, we can only do what he commands us to do. I want to go back now, you must not stay out too late.”

Waving his hand, he walked away.

Hearing him, the two boys felt as if their heart was weighed down by lead; absent-mindedly they continued toward the direction of Daiqing Yuan.

Kou Zhong looked up, letting the snowflakes landed on his face, enjoying the feeling of cold ice on his skin. He sighed and said, "The struggle over the world [tian xia] has just begun, internal strife already appeared within the Wagang Army. Looks like Wagang Army is not a good material to vie for the world."

Xu Ziling said ruefully, "Just in that term 'vying for the world', naturally everybody will be 'you fight, I snatch'. The greats will fight over big thing, the small will fight over small thing. Zhong Shao, do you still have the interest to enter the contest?"

Kou Zhong's spirit was shaken. He said, "If the world is won by Li Mi, Ol' Die, those kind of people who are crafty scoundrel by nature, won't common people suffer calamity? Don't you think it would be better if we became the emperor?"

Xu Ziling sneered and said, "There can only be one emperor; you can become one. I am not interested."

Kou Zhong laughed aloud. When he looked up, he saw the Daiqing Yuan's big courtyard and the golden-lacquered signboard. "We are here!" he happily said.

Xu Ziling pulled him back. "Are we going to go in and ask for Peipei right away?" he asked.

Kou Zhong was bemused, "If we are not looking for Peipei, then whom are we looking for?" he said.

"This place is Shen Luoyan's old nest," Xu Ziling reminded him, "Although she does not dare to send people trailing us openly, it's impossible for her not to know if we are randomly barging all over the place. And then when she investigates later, she would immediately find out that as soon as we get in, we single out Peipei, as if we are her old flames. It would be strange indeed if that did not raise her suspicion."

Kou Zhong slapped his forehead, "You are very thorough," he admitted, "What should we do then? Are we going in or not?"

"We are definitely going in," Xu Ziling said, "But it must be the procuress herself who introduces us. At that time we'll play it by ear!"

Kou Zhong let out a forced laugh; he said, "We must not fail our bodies in vain. The fire in me lighted up by Chuchu has not stopped burning until now!"

Amidst the happy giggle, the two boys strutted into Daiqing Yuan.

Seeing the robe the two boys were wearing had Big Boss Mansion insignia embroidered on it, the guards at the door did not dare to be negligent. Bowing respectfully with clasped hands they welcomed the two boys into the reception area, and handed them over to the female brothel keeper who was coming out to greet them.

Although the two boys had never really enjoyed the gentle and soft taste of the inside of the pleasure house, they were already familiar with the initial procedure. First, they bestowed a tip, and then they found a set of chairs to sit down.

The reception lobby was noisy, several pretty maids shuttling around six, seven groups of guests, waiting upon the customers attentively, while teasing and laughing with them; the air was thick with the thoughts of love.

The procuress serving the two boys was called Lan Yi [lit. orchid aunt], a middle-aged, but still attractive woman, she still looked rather pretty. Just by looking at her good looks, they knew that the brothel Baling Bang operated was a first-class business.

Lan Yi noticed the two boys were handsome and of outstanding quality. Xu Ziling was scholarly and classy, Kou Zhong was straight and impressive looking. It was the first time that she came across this kind of men in this kind of place. Her beautiful eyes were nearly burning with passion. With a smiling face that looked like a flower she said, "Two Gongzi must've just been back in triumphal return with Da Longtou, otherwise, how come tonight is the first time you came to visit

us?”

Taking a cup of fragrant tea offered by a pretty maid, Kou Zhong giggled happily and said, “There will always be first time for everything. Tonight it is the first time that I came across such an enchanting beauty like Lan Yi. Who knows? Perhaps in our previous lives we were husband and wife!”

Hearing that, Lan Yi covered her mouth while laughing tenderly; like a fluttering stem of flower she said, “Gongzi really knows how sweet-talk a girl; be careful now, nujia might disregard the girls’ resentment and hog you for myself!”

Xu Ziling was quite amused to see Kou Zhong’s action in pretending to be an old hand in the midst of a cluster of flowers; but he only watched silently from the side.

However, how could Lan Yi be willing to spare him? Her beautiful eyes swept across, she threw a coquettish glance over at him and said, “Xu Gongzi is a lot quieter than you are, but all the same nujia is bewitched that my mind is in chaos.”

Kou Zhong sank himself in the soft chair; he sneered and said, “He is the one who ought to be bewitched; if you let this kid climb onto your bed, do you think he would still be able to maintain his current dignified air of a sour-looking old scholar?”

Noticing Xu Ziling’s face was blushing, Lan Yi laughed happily. She reached out to pat Kou Zhong’s thigh and while catching for her breath, she said, “Right now Kou Gongzi is like this, but when you are on my bed, will you be like a dead person?”

Inwardly Kou Zhong was smiling wryly; because if he really went into her bed, practically he did not know how to start. But of course on the surface he still maintained the air of a veteran who has criss-crossed the field of love. Slapping the arm of the chair he said, “Who are the most popular girls in here?”

Lan Yi gladly obliged, “Those with the highest status are already booked, but looking at two Gongzi, nujia may make exception to arrange for them to visit

you. Let you meet them first, and then you can make your reservation. What do you think?”

Xu Ziling smiled and said, “Can you at least tell us their fragrant names first?”

Lan Yi mentioned five, six names in succession, like Cui’er, Qing’er, and so on, but there was no Peipei.

Kou Zhong rolled his eyes; he laughed and said, “Other than Lan Yi, who might be available to accompany us enjoying the night?”

Lan Yi cast him a sidelong glance in mock anger; she sultrily said, “If Kou Gongzi tease nujia again, let’s see if nujia will let you get away.” And then she mentioned another string of names, but still there was no Peipei.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt a headache was coming. It was only then did they regret not asking Xiang Yushan for more details. But this moment they were already riding a tiger, it would be hard to get off.

In the past, although the two boys adored pleasure houses, but since each time they visited a brothel they always had danger lurking on every side, plus they were anxious over Susu, as well as anxious over the risky conditions in which they were planning to escape, they lost the mood to have fun with women [orig. ‘cuddle with the red and lying down with the bluish-green’].

However, if they turned on their heels just like that, it would be inappropriate; yet if they pressed on and continued questioning her, they would raise her suspicion. Logically speaking, it was unlikely that the entire brothel, from top to bottom, were Baling Bang people. If they were not careful, they would reveal their secret.

Suddenly someone came to Lan Yi, leaned close to her and whispered a few words. When the man left, Lan Yi’s countenance became a bit unnatural; forcing a smile, she said, “A room has just become available. It would be better for nujia to take two Gongzi there first, at least it will be better than waiting in this crowded room.”

The two boys knew she was not telling them the truth, but they both thought that very likely that 'Peipei' found out about their arrival, hence they gladly followed her going upstairs.

When the door opened, the person their eyes saw was Shen Luoyan, who was sitting calmly inside. She was greeting them with her charming smile.

Lan Yi spoke in low voice, "Nujia is only following order, two Gongzi please forgive me."

The two boys felt as if a bucket of cold water had just been dumped onto their head, they both groaned inwardly.

Kou Zhong carefully examined the surrounding; other than the young maid waiting upon them, there did not seem to be any troop lying in ambush. Therefore, he bravely walked in, and sat down across from her. Xu Ziling had no choice but to sit next to him.

After the young maid left, Kou Zhong leered at her, "Tonight, are you going to accompany me, or him?"

Shen Luoyan indifferently said, "Of course I will accompany both of you. But only in this room, drinking wine and having a heart-to-heart chat."

Tonight she was wearing plain white clothes, while outside the window the fine snowflakes floating in the air. The two boys felt that it was so hard for them to grow hostile toward her, yet they were fully aware that they were facing imminent catastrophe at every turn. It was indeed a very contradictory feeling.

Xu Ziling sneered and said, "Spit it out, Shaoye still needs to go home to sleep."

Shen Luoyan raised her wine cup and cheerfully said, "The night is young, raise your cup and have a heart-to-heart chat; isn't that a delight in one's life? Let Luoyan toast two gentlemen a cup."

Kou Zhong giggled and said, "How do we know you didn't put any drug in the

wine?”

Displeased, Shen Luoyan put down her cup; she said with a laugh, “If I want to drug you, I don’t need to show myself! You haven’t made any progress at all; instead of seeking pleasure in Longtou Mansion, where most imperial concubines from Yang Guang’s temporary imperial residence live, you came here to spend your silver to buy some smile. I wonder if all men are miserable wretch like you?”

Kou Zhong countered by saying, “Somebody received someone else’s benevolence, yet instead of thinking about repaying the debt of gratitude, she only thinks about how to conspire against her benefactors. I wonder if those people were born with the heart of wolf and the lungs of dog?”

‘Pfft!’ Shen Luoyan burst in laughter. “Touche!” she said, “But I am here now precisely to pay the debt of gratitude. Actually Luoyan is committed to give myself wholly to marry one of you, Shaoye!”

“Here we go again!” Xu Ziling was upset, “If you continue like this, we’ll just brush away our sleeves and leave.”

Shen Luoyan said, “Xu Shaoye must not take offense, there is a rumor in Jianghu recently, Yuwen Wudi was beaten by you that he ran away in panic. If this continues, perhaps one day your fame and power will surpass Ba Fenghan and the ‘shadow assassin’ Yang Xuyan, who are currently like the sun in the middle of the sky.”

Hearing the name Ba Fenghan, and found out about the name of the ‘shadow assassin’, the two boys’ spirit was shaken; they both had a faint feeling that one day these two men would become their opponent.

Observing their countenance, Shen Luoyan was greatly astounded, “Turns out the rumor is not false at all,” she said, “In that case, it was indeed you yourselves who dispelled the strength-scattering drug from your body by circulating your internal energy; no wonder at that time your forehead was gleaming with perspiration.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “All of those things have nothing to do with you. To make a long story short, Shaoye still want to seek pleasure.”

Shen Luoyan smiled and said, “Then you ought to answer Luoyan’s question: among the outstanding heroes of today, who could surpass Duke Li?”

“How about the Li Clan?” Xu Ziling blurted out.

Shen Luoyan showed disdain, “From the four clan leaders, speaking about martial art skill, Li Yuan can only be ranked at the last of the list; speaking about ability and sagacity, he is also number one, if you count backwards. Speaking about personal character, he is cowardice, afraid of getting involved, indecisive, and just like you: he clings to the loveliness of a woman too much. Even knowing that it was a crime punishable by beheading, he still privately accepted from the palace supervisor of Jinyang Palace, Pei Ji, two stunning beauties hand-picked from Yang Guang’s collection of palace maids. How can this kind of person accomplish big thing? I can’t believe your vision is severely lacking like this!”

How would the two boys know that Li Yuan was that kind of person? But by looking at how Li Shimin was using a thousand ways and a hundred plans trying to get him to revolt, they knew that even if Shen Luoyan did not hit the target, she was not too far off.

Shen Luoyan complacently said, “As for your Old Die Du Fuwei, he can only be considered an ambitious and ruthless character of the underworld. Vying for territory in Jianghu, he is more than adequate, but vying for the world? When will his turn come?”

After a short pause, she continued, “Right now Duke Mi has opened the storehouse to aid the common people. He also calls the world to arms, by enumerating Yang Guang’s ten major crimes. The heart of the people all over the world, none did not turn toward him. Those with a clear view of things ought to know who has received the Heaven’s command to be the master.”

Xu Ziling let out a cold laugh and said, “You open your mouth, you close your mouth, it’s always Li Mi this and Li Mi that; where actually have you placed Da Longtou?”

Totally unfazed, Shen Luoyan calmly replied, “You can only blame yourself for being muddleheaded. Today Duke Zhai already informed me formally to notify Duke Mi that he is going to abdicate to yield to a more worthy person. As soon as the high-ranking military officers assemble, he will publicly announce this matter. Hence the reason I open my mouth, I close my mouth, it’s always Li Mi this and Li Mi that. So what’s actually the problem?”

Hearing that, the two boys looked at each other. It was only then did they find out that Zhai Rang already publicly conceded, and gave up the Da Longtou [reminder: big boss] position of Wagang Army to someone else. Immediately they felt some kind of heavy burden has been relieved from their heart.

A weapon of war ought to be kept in check.

Shen Luoyan’s pretty eyes lit up, flashing an unfathomable expression.

Kou Zhong still refused to concede; he said, “What about the other three Clans? Will they be willing to sit back and watch the world falls into your Wagang Army’s hands?”

Shen Luoyan cunningly and leisurely replied, “The Song Clan’s power is in the south, they can only rely on northern power to get the things done; hence we can set them aside. Dugu Clan’s association with the imperial family is too deep; without the lips, the teeth feel the cold [i.e. interdependent], hence they also have no power to strive for the world. Only Yuwen Clan has sufficient manpower and enough talent to accomplish something small. But because they have been hunting dogs for so many years, they planted enmity everywhere. If Yang Guang perishes, Yuwen Clan will turn into a target of a multitude of arrows. Even if they have three heads and six arms, they will not be able to deal with it. Hee ... hee ...! Plus you won’t let Yuwen Huaji off. Is Luoyan correct?”

The two boys were silenced by her.

This woman knew the current situation, big and small, from top to bottom, like the back of her hands; it was not surprising that Li Mi put her in an important position.

Xu Ziling said, “What about Guo Zihe, Liu Wuzou, Liang Shidou, three people? They have the Tujues behind their back. I am afraid your Duke Mi is not Bi Xuan’s match at all!”

Still relaxed, Shen Luoyan calmly said, “As it turns out, that is precisely their biggest weakness. Honestly, do you want Tujue’s evil claws to be extended to the Central Plains? Duke Mi often says that opposing the will of the people is the surest way to defeat. Yang Guang is the best example.”

Kou Zhong looked like he was about to speak, but stopped himself at the last minute.

Shen Luoyan laughed and said, “You were going to ask about Dou Jiande, Wang Bo, or perhaps Shen Faxing, Li Zitong, Xu Yuanlang, and the others, weren’t you? Among the warlords vying for supremacy, only our Wagang Army has tight control over the throat of the canal connecting Yellow River and its tributaries. From the west going toward the Eastern Capital, from the east facing Jiangdu, just looking at the geographical location and the terrain, nobody can compete with us.

Kou Zhong was totally unyielding; he sighed and said, “After all is said and done, all you want from us is the secret of the Duke Yang Treasure. How about this: you marry one of us, the treasure will be yours so that in turn you can hand it over to Duke Mi to ingratiate himself with.”

Seeing that even though she had exhausted all arguments and still failed to convince the two boys, she was greatly frustrated, “Go to your Niang, you little demons with garrulous tongue; just watch if I don’t pull your tongue out.”

The two boys did not expect that Shen Luoyan who has always been refined, gentle and soft, could imitate them in speaking vulgar language; they were overjoyed.

Finally Shen Luoyan was unable to hold her temper; brushing away her sleeve, she walked away and said, “This is called ‘refusing a toast only to be forced to drink a forfeit’. If you could leave Xingyang safe and sound, I, Shen Luoyan, will

...”

The two boys exchanged a wink, and then together they loudly continued, “Will give myself in marriage to you, two little demons.”

Shen Luoyan was taken aback, but then she regained her usual composure as she smiled sweetly and said, “So be it!”

Listening to her footsteps disappearing in the distance, the two boys felt their scalp went numb.

Why didn’t she deal with them right away? Could it be that there was a larger conspiracy brewing?

Book 4 Chapter 12 – Disaster's Sudden Arrival

The next day Zhai Rang invited them to have breakfast together, accompanied by Wang Ruxin and Tu Shufang, but Zhai Jiao was not present.

Zhai Rang appeared melancholy. After asking the two boys some everyday life, current situation matters, he silently drank his tea. The other four had no choice but to also keep silent.

Out of the blue, Zhai Rang suddenly asked, "How's the situation over there?"

But Wang Ruxin seemed to understand what he was talking about; he replied, "Yesterday I bumped into Xu Shiji; he said that Duke Mi is thinking about taking Liyang Storehouse. After Luokou is captured, militias from all parts of the country will come to realign their allegiance, so our army's prestige will be even more flourishing."

Zhai Rang let out a stifled grunt, "Any news from Yang Guang's side?" he asked.

Wang Ruxin said, "Right now Wang Shichong is already in Luoyang, plotting a counterattack plan. This man is a great general of the imperial court, he is also proficient in military strategy and tactics, this time Duke Mi will meet a formidable opponent."

Kou Zhong asked Tu Shufang in low voice, "What kind of guy is Xu Shiji?"

Tu Shufang replied with a smile, "He and Zu Junyan are known as the Two Valiant of Wagang Army, he is also Shen Luoyan's boyfriend. But until now Shen

Luoyan is still unwilling to marry him.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly stunned; turned out Shen Luoyan was already taken [orig. famous flower has its owner]. A sour, helpless feeling suddenly floated in their hearts.

Wang Ruxin added, “I heard there is also a Sui government official called Wei Zheng[1], who is in charge of Wuyang County region’s ‘Cheng Yuan’s Treasure Code’; three days ago he offered the entire set of the Treasure Code to Duke Mi, so that nowadays Li Mi has become the most prestigious figure among the militias.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling noticed how Wang Ruxin seemed to be constantly provoking Zhai Rang; inwardly they felt very strange.

Zhai Rang pressed on the table and stood up; turning toward Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, two people, he softly said, “Come with me to the garden!”

Unable to make any sense of it, the two boys simply followed him to the garden.

Zhai Rang walked ahead of them, with his hands behind his back; he seemed to be deep in thought.

The snow had stopped, but the snow accumulation on the ground reached about a chi deep; icicles were hanging down from the trees. Several servants were busy shoveling the snow; seeing Zhai Rang, they hastily went down on their knees to kowtow.

Zhai Rang went straight toward the small pavilion in the middle of the garden. He looked up to the sky, and with his back still facing the two boys, he said, “Sit down!”

The two boys sat down absentmindedly.

Zhai Rang spoke in heavy voice, “When I heard about you, I immediately sent

people to check the events surrounding your past. Only last night they returned to report back to me. I really did not know that your names have already spread all around Jianghu. Evidently there are a lot of things that Li Mi is keeping from me.”

And then he turned around; with eyes burning he looked at the two boys and said, “Do you really know the location of the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’?”

With a bitter laugh Kou Zhong replied, “If we did, we would have gone to get it early on.”

Zhai Rang nodded. “That is reasonable,” he said, “No matter how much Luocha Nu [woman] cherished you, in the end she was still a Korean, it’s improbable that she would entrust such matter concerning the rise and fall of her country to a couple of Central Plains people like you.”

In their hearts the two boys cried out, ‘Close shave!’ It was best if Zhai Rang thought like that.

Zhai Rang sighed and said, “If I were as young as you are, I would definitely run far away from here. After my internal injury recovered, I would fight for the rivers and mountains again. But now I am already old, I don’t have the courage to do it all over again.”

And then he continued, “Were it not for Li Mi’s malicious plot against me, today to whom the deer falls [i.e. the one to seize the empire. On side note: Jin Yong explored this idiom in ‘Deer and Cauldron’.] is still unknown.”

Seeing the two boys were not surprised at all, he nodded and said, “You have already guessed that the man hiding inside the trunk who plotted against me was indeed Li Mi.”

The two boys had no choice but to nod.

Zhai Rang breathed out a mouthful of air; he continued, “I can never let the enemy, as well as my own side, that I really suffer internal injury. Even Wang

Ruxin thinks that Li Mi's plot against me had failed. That's why he is trying to incite me to kill Li Mi and seize the power back into my hands."

Xu Ziling was baffled, "Then why did you tell Shen Luoyan that you are giving up the Da Longtou position? Wouldn't it be the same as telling them that you are injured?"

Zhai Rang's countenance changed. "Did you come across Shen Luoyan last night?" he asked.

The two boys narrated what had happened the previous night.

Zhai Rang's countenance turned incredibly ugly. He sighed and said, "You have fallen into her trap, basically there is no such thing. She intentionally said that because she knows the current close relationship between you and me, so she was testing your reaction. Supposing you did not show any sign of surprise, it would authenticate that I really suffer internal injury."

Stunned, the two boys looked at each other, their mind was in turmoil.

Zhai Rang recovered his composure, "Don't blame yourselves," he said lightly, "First of all, it was due to your lack of experience, secondly, Shen Luoyan is as crafty as a fox. All we have to do right now is to think of a way to remedy the situation."

Xu Ziling apologetically said, "We have implicated Da Longtou!"

Kou Zhong was overwhelmed with guilty feeling that he nearly wanted to kill himself. Slapping the stone table, he said, "We shouldn't have slipped out."

Zhai Rang sat down across the table from them, with an extremely solemn expression he said, "We must beat them at their own game; let's get the throne out, hopefully it can buy us some time."

After a short pause, he continued, "Right now Ol' Zhai has something I'd like to entrust to you; I wish for you to take Jiao'er to a certain place, then I will have no

fear of trouble in the rear, and will have free hand in dealing with Li Mi.”

The two boys felt big headache; dealing with this hard-to-please Zhai Jiao, a short time already felt like forever, how would dealing with her for a prolonged period of time feel like?

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Shen Luoyan hates us the most; just before leaving last night she said that she guarantees we won’t be able to leave the city. Da Longtou is asking the wrong person.”

Zhai Rang was staring blankly for half a day. Finally he murmured, “Who in the world does not want to catch you, yet you are still able to live free and easy. It’s a clear sign that you do have some abilities.”

Hastily Xu Ziling declined modestly, “That is because the opponents did not really want to kill us. Besides, all those times it was only the two of us, naturally making our escape were a lot easier.”

Zhai Rang nodded his agreement, “In that case,” he said, “I’ll have to make different arrangement to send off Jiao’er. Do you want me to send Susu along?”

The two boys hurriedly replied, “That won’t be necessary!”

Zhai Rang smiled wryly and said, “It was because I spoiled her, nowadays everybody is afraid of Jiao’er. Only she and Susu happen to be especially good to each other. Ay!”

Remembering that Zhai Rang let Susu to accompany Wang Bodang, the two boys did not feel particularly sympathetic toward his laments.

Zhai Rang continued pouring out his heart to the two boys, “When you reach to where I am, you will know that you’ll have to do a lot of things against your will. It was because I am not as ruthless as Li Mi that today I came to this plight.”

The two boys did not know how to comfort him.

Zhai Rang suddenly took off the dragon-engraved ring from his left middle finger. Stuffing it into Kou Zhong's hand, he said, "Jiao'er will leave today, and tomorrow it will be your turn. One more day Li Mi has not returned, one more day the city of Xiangyang remains in my control."

Kou Zhong looked down to examine the ring in his palm; he was confused, "This is ..."

Zhai Rang's voice was heavy, "I don't have any face to ask you to help me. But in order not to let my men suspect that I am a coward, I can only go to outsiders like the two of you to do it."

Xu Ziling said, "Whatever errands Da Longtou wants us to do, there is no harm in telling us."

Zhai Rang said, "Supposing my delaying tactic succeeded, I want you to take this ring to Leshou and look for Dou Jiande. In terms of talent, wisdom and martial art skill, this man is above me, plus he has a deep friendship with me. You can truthfully tell him my situation. What comes next, just leave it to him to handle."

Kou Zhong received the ring, and resolutely said, "Such a trivial thing, we can certainly do it for Da Longtou."

Zhai Rang suddenly revealed a cold and ruthless smile as he said in low voice, "He is ruthless, I won't hold on to righteousness. I only need to spill a bit of secret to Wang Shichong, I guarantee that'll teach Li Mi a lesson in suffering defeats. And then the legend that he emerged victorious in every battle will collapse."

Hearing that, Kou and Xu felt a chill crept in their heart.

Although right now they were standing on Zhai Rang's side, they did not dare to give compliment toward the way he conducts himself or his method.

Zhai Rang also seemed to realize that he had committed a faux pas. "You may

go back now,” he said, “I still want to sit here and think about how to arrange for your departure. I will let you know later.”

The two boys breathed a sigh of relief and withdrew in haste.

Li Mi may come back any minute, they went to Tu Shufang; Kou Zhong asked for a long saber, but Xu Ziling wanted to use short halberd. They both thought that starting now, even going to sleep they had to have their weapons in their bosom.

[1] Wei Zheng (580-643), Tang politician and historian, notorious as a critic and editor of the History of Sui Dynasty.

The two boys also went to find Susu, telling her that they were leaving tomorrow night. Afterwards they went back to the courtyard to practice martial art.

That day passed uneventfully. After dinner, the two of them returned to hide in their room.

Kou Zhong said, “Since that loathsome granny Jiao is leaving tonight, we’d better have Su Jie sleep in my room, while the two of us sleep together here like before. If something happens, escaping will be more convenient.”

Xu Ziling agreed, “Old Zhai is asking us a favor, he won’t dare to oppose. Whatever we do, even if his eyes are wide open, he would have no choice but just turning a blind eye on us.”

He has not finished speaking, there was a knock on the door, Susu’s voice was heard outside, “Are you there?”

The two boys were greatly delighted; busily they welcomed Susu inside. Who would have thought that as soon as the door was closed, she threw herself to the two boys and cried bitterly? “Miss has left!” she said with a sob.

Recalling Zhai Jiao, no matter how hard they tried, they simply could not emulate Susu's distress.

Some comforting words later, Susu was calming down somewhat, but her pretty eyes were quite red and swollen from crying.

Susu agonizingly said, "Now you are the only family Jiejie has, will you leave Jiejie?"

To comfort Susu, Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Of course not, unless Jiejie really loves that Yiqi Shan. Married woman naturally cannot have us cherish our Jiejie anymore."

Susu turned tears into laughter; pouting playfully, she reprimanded him lightly. The two boys hastily carried out their magic, and only when she seemed to forget Zhai Jiao that they made their proposal to have her stay in the adjacent room.

Susu rolled her pretty eyes; blushing, she said, "The bed is so big, if the three of us sleep together, won't it be safer?"

Xu Ziling jumped in fright, "How can that be?"

Susu crossly said, "Don't you dare having ideas. Between us, sister and brothers, we are as bright as the sun and the moon, it's just that this time we are a bit closer than usual! This is everybody's dream, actually."

Kou Zhong stammered, "If people find out, what would they think?"

Susu's pretty face blushed slightly, but she persisted, "Who would find out? Don't tell me you don't think it is fun?"

Finally Xu Ziling conceded, "Jiejie is not afraid, what are we afraid of? Tonight the three of us, sister and brothers will share the bed. Zhong Shao, you must not make any illicit move."

Kou Zhong cried out to heavens for the injustice he received, “Who do you think Zhong Shao is? Much less I revere Jiejie as an immortal. Xiao Ling, I demand an apology.”

Susu cheerfully said, “I trust you, that should be enough.”

Xu Ziling warned her, “This kid Kou Zhong always brandish his hands and swinging his legs during sleeping, for the past many years I don’t know how many times I was punched by his fist, was kicked by his legs.”

Kou Zhong laughed bitterly and said, “Worst case scenario, Jiejie can sleep on your side over there.”

Susu shook her head, “No!” she said, “I want to sleep between the two of you. Both are my good Didi.”

The two boys were overwhelmed with emotion that they felt like crying. Right now the three sister and brothers only had each other to depend to.

“Be careful,” Xu Ziling reminded Kou Zhong, “Chuchu might come to look for you. That will spoil our grand plan.”

“Ah!” Susu exclaimed; from her bosom she took out a necklace with jade pendant, and solemnly said, “I came here this time, it was actually on behalf of Chuchu, to give this jade pendant to you; she implored me to personally witness you putting it on your neck.”

Kou Zhong was shaken. “Did she leave with your Miss?” he asked.

Susu’s emotion was stirred up with concern again, her elegant eyes turned red; hanging her head, she nodded.

Kou Zhong solemnly took the jade pendant and put it on around his neck, and then he sighed and said, “Why does the love between man and woman cause so much pain?”

Stomping his feet, Xu Ziling said, "You should have asked Old Zhai to leave her behind."

With a wry smile Kou Zhong said, "At that time I practically did not even think about her. But now I am very sad, just like if I have lost something very precious in my life."

Xu Ziling asked Susu on his behalf, "Do you know where your Miss is going?"

Susu shook her head, "Even Miss herself did not know," she replied, "Only Tu Shufang knows."

Xu Ziling said, "We can always ask Old Zhai tomorrow."

Kou Zhong felt a little relieved; he was back at his giggling manner as he teased Susu, "Jiejie, can we go to bed now?"

Susu gracefully rose up, kicked her boots, threw off her silk gown, exposing her even more well-developed curves.

"Don't take off more clothes!" Xu Ziling hastily said, "If something happens we can go a bit faster."

Susu stomped her feet in anger, "Xiao Ling, really! Who wants to take off more clothes?"

Although the three of them were babbling about Li Mi was going to attack Big Boss Mansion tonight, but actually none of them really thought that Li Mi would return tonight.

From his pile of clothes in the trunk Kou Zhong took out a cloth belt, tossed it toward Xu Ziling and said with a laugh, "I want you to take care of this life-saving rope; if something happens, you carry Su Jie on your back, while I will be responsible to open up a path, killing our way out of the heavy siege."

Susu shuddered. “Can you not talk about scary things like that?” she said.

Xu Ziling lifted up the mosquito net and respectfully said, “Jiejie, please!”

Smiling, Susu gracefully climbed onto the bed, and lay down in the middle. Flustered, the two boys hastily blew out the oil lamp and took off their outer robe. And then one after another they climbed from the foot of the bed and lay down on Susu’s left and right.

In the darkness of the room, the three people’s heart was throbbing. Susu suddenly broke into giggle; gasping for breath, she said, “I will be surprised if you don’t fall off the bed tonight; can’t you get closer to me?”

The two boys also giggled and scooted closer to her. An unbounded sweet and warm feeling welled up in three people’s heart. Susu pulled the quilt over to cover all of them. She sighed and said, “Even if I die tonight, Jiejie has two such good Didi like you, I feel that my life has not been in vain.”

“Uh?” she suddenly exclaimed, “How come you did not even take off your boots?”

The two boys laughed hysterically. Kou Zhong struggled hard to take a deep breath to say, “So that when we have to flee it will be a bit more convenient!”

Susu was cross; she sat up and had the two boys take off their boots.

While they were busy doing her bidding, suddenly there was a ‘Pop! Pop!’ noise out of nowhere, followed by sound of people shouting.

Kou Zhong sprang up, pushed the window open and saw blazing fire from the direction of the front courtyard, the intensity of the fire was terrifying.

By this time Xu Ziling and Susu had come to his side; watching the scene, they were dumbstruck.

“The fire is strange,” Kou Zhong said, “Must be an insider job.” Before he even finished speaking, sound of fighting came from four sides, eight directions.

Staying calm, Xu Ziling knelt down and called out, “Jiejie, quickly climb onto my back.”

Susu was so frightened that her knees went soft. She had to lean on Kou Zhong, who quickly grabbed her and helped her up on Xu Ziling’s back.

Although Xu Ziling felt that Susu’s body emitted a high degree of attractive force, his heart was pure; he hastily cleared his mind and steered away his thought from that direction.

Susu only felt that this little brother’s broad back was warm and safe. Considering that she was scared out her wits [orig. lost soul, dropped spirit], for the time being she was not lost in wild and fanciful thoughts either.

The sound of clashing weapons kept coming in. After tying Susu well, Kou Zhong fetched the short halberd for Xu Ziling, while took the long saber for himself.

“You follow behind me,” he said coldly, “If we get separated, we’ll meet again at Daiqing Yuan. You must never try to leave the city, Li Mi will never let anybody out of the city.”

Finished speaking, he rushed out of the window.

Xu Ziling gathered his thought, and then followed behind him.

Kou Zhong leaped to a high place, and saw all around him were warriors wearing red cloth on their heads, attacking in full force, killing the guards of the Big Boss Mansion, even the maids and servants were not spared. For a short while the sound of wailing shook the sky.

Zhai Rang’s voice was heard coming from the left, “Revel thief Li Mi, do you dare to fight mano a mano with me, Zhai Rang?”

Li Mi's gentle and pleasant-to-hear voice responded, "Da Longtou's request, how could Li Mi dare not to comply?"

This moment Xu Ziling already caught up with Kou Zhong; he called out, "This is the only chance to escape!"

Kou Zhong understood immediately. If they did not take advantage of the moment Zhai Rang pinning down Li Mi's main force to escape, they might never have the chance to leave.

With a loud shout Kou Zhong raised his saber and flew toward the eaves of the building to their right.

End of Book 4

Book 5 Chapter 1 – Escape By The Skin Of Their Teeth

Most of Zhai Rang's Big Boss Mansion had caught fire, and the fire was continuously spreading, the flame illuminated the sky, reflected by the dark cloud above that it felt like a big rock pressing on their hearts. Although the fire intensity was increasing, nobody was fighting it. The shouting from the killing shook the heavens; dead bodies were everywhere. Li Mi's men had their faces covered in black cloth like nightwalkers, making it difficult to recognize them.

Kou Zhong raised his saber to open up a path, Xu Ziling, with Susu on his back, followed behind him. They had just leaped up onto the tiled roof when four men in black pounced on them like mad tigers. When they saw that Kou and Xu, two people were not wearing black, they immediately raised their swords to slash at them.

Kou Zhong met the attack head-on. In this critical moment, automatically the true qi within his body surged on; an extremely cold qi, hidden inside a warm stream, flowed from his hand onto his long saber, emitting a whistling noise as it slice the air, cutting across the enemy.

The man had never imagined that the saber's momentum could be this swift and fierce. The most frightening thing was that the opponent's blade carried a blast of incomparably frigid cold saber qi, so that when the enemy met it, he would immediately feel the chill in his heart, that even his qi and blood could not flow unimpeded.

By the time the man allocated at least half of his strength to resist Kou Zhong's saber qi, Kou Zhong's long saber had already hacked onto the man's sword so

that from attacking, the sword turned into blocking the saber instead.

‘Dang!’ A clear ringing noise was heard, the man let out a miserable scream; unexpectedly the sword, along with the man, were hacked by Kou Zhong’s saber that he fell off the roof tile.

Kou Zhong was also shaken by the man’s reacting force that his wrist felt numb. But a sudden qi arose from within his body; the numbness and pain immediately subsided.

At this moment his eyes, ears, nose and the other senses have become incomparably sharp; so much so that his skin was able to clearly sense the variation in the air surrounding him due to the opponents’ movements. Although by this time, due to lack of experience he was unable to reach the state ‘all-seeing’, but the day would come when even if his two eyes were blindfolded, he would be able to ‘see’ the opponent’s attacking move.

After the enemy taking the lead to attack had fallen, the other three men were obviously so shocked that their actions suffered a split-second delay, exposing a gap in their offense. Without even thinking Kou Zhong swiftly charged from the slanted roof tile surface going upwards, entering the gap in the middle of the enemy’s attacking formation. His long saber swept in a large circle, slashing the three enemy’s swords in succession.

This time, the people following Li Mi in the raid on the Big Boss Mansion were all handpicked from among Li Mi’s troops, every one was skilled, valiant, and ferocious; but encountering Kou Zhong, who was even braver and more unstoppable than they were, their acute spirit was dampened. The first two men had their swords hacked by Kou Zhong; they let a stifled grunt, and were forced to retreat.

After dispelling the threat from these two swords, Kou Zhong’s murderous spirit arose. With a loud shout his broadsword increased in speed, with all his strength he hacked down on the last man’s sword.

The man brandished his sword to block, but he felt the opponent’s saber strength was as heavy as a mountain; his entire body felt like he has just entered

an icehouse. With a miserable scream he was hacked down by Kou Zhong that he rolled down to the ground.

While Kou Zhong was still pondering why he became very formidable, Xu Ziling swept past to his side, while hurling another man in black in Kou Zhong's direction. The man was jolted back by Kou Zhong that his qi and blood surged, and the icy cold saber qi penetrated his meridian; the feeling was unbearable. Suddenly hot tears welled up like lightning in his eyes. He was just about to raise his sword to block, the pit of his stomach felt as if he was struck by lightning. Without even having time to scream, he was thrown backward, fell face up on the ground and died a violent death.

The other man was so scared that he turned around and ran toward the other side of the roof, while pursing his lips to send out a whistle, calling for help. The two boys exchanged glances; they did not dare to remain on the roof, hence they jumped down to the ground and relying on their memory, they killed their way to the left, toward the three buildings in the eastern courtyard. As long as they could cross the eastern courtyard, they would be able to climb over the high wall, and out of the Big Boss Mansion.

However, Li Mi's force was very organized; in groups of three or five, they combed the area looking for the enemy. Whenever they saw people not wearing black clothes, they showed no mercy and simply killed them.

On the other hand, the mansion guards on Zhai Rang's side was like a sheet of loose sand; every body was trying desperately to break out of the siege, no longer had any heart to continue fighting. Which one was the strong, which one was the weak, it could be clearly and easily seen.

Kou and Xu, two boys had just taken about ten paces or so, they already met a group of enemy numbering about a dozen, some of them even burst out of the window of a nearby building, charging madly toward the two boys.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were scared out of their wits; they accelerated forward so that in the twinkling of an eye the distance between two sides increased considerably.

Kou Zhong was afraid the opponent would harm Susu with secret projectiles, hence they turned around behind the main hall, and like arrows the three of them flew toward the eastern courtyard.

Ahead they saw a group of men in black were surrounding about a dozen or so Zhai Mansion's guards, engaging them in fierce battle. Xu Ziling was thinking about leaping onto the roof, but he suddenly felt splatter of blood coming from someone who was falling off the roof. Clenching his teeth, he rushed even faster forward, sweeping toward two men who had their back towards him.

The two men suddenly felt a blast of qi entering their body; abandoning the enemy in front of them, they turned their swords around to block. Xu Ziling let out a wild roar, his short halberd swept the sword of the one on the right first, jolting the man so that he was thrown aside. Immediately afterwards he changed his move, the short halberd pulled and pushed, so that the other man was blocking an empty space, and then Xu Ziling watched for a gap he could exploit, the tip of his halberd entered the man's chest.

By the time the man fell dead, Xu Ziling, with Susu on his back, already entered the center of the hard battle. Like a shadow Kou Zhong followed closely behind him; flipping his broadsword up, he deflected an incoming lance, and then with another flip he hacked another man's flank.

As the Zhai Mansion guards felt the hard pressure suddenly decreased, they all scattered in all directions. The situation was extremely chaotic.

Kou Zhong turned his head around and saw the dozen or so enemies they left behind were closing in fast. Aghast, he yelled, "Go!"

Xu Ziling was also aware that the situation was extremely critical, if the enemy managed to cut their path, they would lose their lives right then and there. Additionally, he felt Susu's body on his back was trembling violently. His heroic spirit rose up; using only the toes on his feet as a support, his short halberd turned into hundreds of flashing blades, forcing the four enemies right in front of him to scatter away, and thus he managed to split the encirclement, and was finally able to dash toward the eastern courtyard.

But the situation on the area surrounding the Zhai Mansion was even more dangerous. Apparently Li Mi has deployed a massive military force to prevent anybody from the Zhai Mansion from escaping. They saw human shadows everywhere; ‘you chase after me, I pursue you’, the killing was so intense that the moon and the stars lost their light.

The three people dashed to the left and darted to the right; each time they were forcing their way toward the eastern courtyard, they were always repelled by the enemy. Not too long afterwards, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling already suffered countless minor injuries; even Susu’s milky white back also suffered a long blade cut. Fortunately, in their attempt to escape, the several dozen Zhai Mansion guards were also rushing the same way, so that they impeded the enemy’s movement. Otherwise, their lives would definitely be hard to protect. Moreover, the two boys had already cut down at least a dozen men from the enemy’s side.

After cutting down five more enemies, under the light from the raging fire the two boys saw that the enemy had seized complete control over the situation; they were surrounding and killing the remaining thirty or so Zhai Mansion guards and slowly pushing them into a corner, unlike the previous ‘you chase after me, I pursue you’ situation, where everybody was running randomly in all directions.

By this time the three people had arrived at coppice woodland outside the reach of the firelight; it seemed that the enemy has temporarily forgotten about them. Looking to the west, most of the buildings in the Zhai Mansion complex had already engulfed in flame, while burst of shouting, yelling and screaming of the battle still came intermittently.

Susu wept. “Laoye must be dead,” she cried.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged a glance; they both felt their qi was depleted their strength gone, they no longer felt as brave as before.

Kou Zhong asked, “Is there any hiding place around here?”

Susu was still shaking in fear by a miserable scream from the direction of the battle; hearing the question, she stared blankly for a moment before pointing toward a rockery in the middle of the pond situated north of the eastern

courtyard. "Let's go that way!" she said.

Without even thinking Xu Ziling carried her on his back flying toward the big pond about a dozen zhang away.

Kou Zhong caught up next to Susu and asked, "Is there any place in the pond we can hide?"

Susu anxiously replied, "Inside the rockery there is a little pond that was used as fish hatchery; after the water was drained, it became a dry well. It is completely hidden."

The two boys were greatly delighted; increasing their vigilance, they listened to eight directions. After evading two groups of the enemy, they proceeded cautiously; making sure nobody noticed their movements. Taking advantage of the immensely golden opportunity while the enemy's attention was focused on stopping the Zhai Mansion guards from escaping, they flitted across the side of the pond, and landed on the fake rock, which diameter was close to two zhang.

Following Susu's direction, the three of them squeezed into the small well, about five chi deep and four chi across [1 chi is approx. 1/3m or 1ft]. Unless someone deliberately broke into the crack in the rock and reached the side of the well, nobody would be able to find the three people.

'Thump, thump, thump ...' They heard each other's heart beating wildly. It was quite a while before, like the killing noise outside, their hearts gradually calmed down.

Kou Zhong said in a low voice, "Is Zhai Rang finished?"

Xu Ziling was about to reply when suddenly he felt his collar was dripping wet; turned out Susu was crying silently. Although the well was dark and he was unable to see Susu's expression, he knew that she was choked with the bleakest emotions; his heart ached as he said, "Don't cry! Your Laoye has led uprising in the past; he would have known that a day like this may come. The situation right now is if you don't kill me, then I'll kill you."

Pressing himself against Susu's back, Kou Zhong also whispered comforting words in her ear, "In the future it will be the two of us who take care of Jiejie!"

The noise outside suddenly died down, even the crackling noise of the fire seemed to disappear; only occasional rustling noise of the sleeve against the breeze was still heard. Apparently Li Mi's men were conducting thorough search to ensure no one slipped through their net.

The three people knew it was a critical moment, they were so scared that they did not even dare to let even half a mouthful of heavy breathing escaped from their nostrils. Additionally, from time to time there were people raising their torches high to look at the rockery; fortunately no one could ever imagine that there was a dry well inside it.

After nobody knew how long, a gentle and pleasant to hear voice was heard from the edge of the pond, "Still can't find those two kids?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling recognized Li Mi's voice; immediately in their hearts they did not stop crying out for their Niang.

Luckily the other party was separated by a distance of four, five zhang, plus the three of them were hidden in the well under the fake rock; otherwise, it would be impossible to conceal their presence from this martial art master whose name shook the world.

Zu Junyan's voice was heard, "They were last seen around this courtyard; that Xu kid was even carrying that precious little maid Susu on his back. And then in the confusion nobody knows where they sneaked out to."

A loud and clear male voice was heard, "Logically speaking, they must be hiding inside the Mansion; but now all rooms have been burned down, the underground tunnel has also been blocked. Where could they go?"

Shen Luoyan's tender voice was heard next; she let out a snort and said, "Even if they were able to escape from the Mansion, they can forget about leaving the city."

While inside the well Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were busy raining down curses on her, Li Mi spoke indifferently, “In any case, don’t let these two boys escape. If we can’t use them, finish them off with a blade, to avoid a new branch grows out of a knot. Understand?”

Zu Junyan and the other chorused their compliance. The sound of footsteps was getting farther and farther away.

The three people have just breathed a sigh of relief, Shen Luoyan’s sigh was heard, “Shiji, my heart is a bit uneasy.”

It was only then did the three people realize that the man with a loud and clear voice was Li Mi’s other general, Xu Shiji, who also happened to be Shen Luoyan’s boyfriend.

Xu Shiji said, “Luoyan, your wisdom and intelligence have always surpassed others’, you always plan in advance; why are you suddenly sounded so bleak, as if you have lost all hopes?”

Shen Luoyan let out a gloomy sigh again, and gently said, “These two boys’ skill is getting better every day, each encounter is more formidable than the last; even Bai Laoliu [ol’ six], Xie Hei, those kind of martial art masters were sent to the western paradise just in a few encounters with them. Moreover, the cause of their death was because their heart and artery were shattered by their powerful qi. If this time we are unable to hold them down, in the future they will become a disaster for us.”

Listening to his, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling’s heroic spirit swelled uncontrollably; they had just found out that turned out they carried enough weight in the minds of the enemy.

Xu Shiji let out a cold snort and said, “If it weren’t for the fact that our attention was focused on that dead devil Zhai, how could they have the chance to show off? Leave the search to me! Even if they flew to the end of the sky, I will bring their body back for you to see.”

The noises outside died down.

The three people were unable to resist their exhaustion; they fell asleep in each other's embrace. Finally they were able to accomplish the magnificent feat of sleeping together.

One after another the three of them were awakened by the cold falling snowflakes.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling have mastered the divine skill of 'Secret to Long Life', it was only natural that they were able to withstand the cold. Susu was wearing fur coat, plus she had practiced a little bit of martial art, and on top of that, she put on a cloak, which rendered her cold proof. The unbearable thing was that Kou Zhong, who pressed himself against her back, was emitting a stream of strangely cold qi that made her feel extremely uncomfortable; while on the other side Xu Ziling was emitting an incomparably hot qi. It was as if her body was subjected to a severe winter on one side, and intense summer on the other; half cold half hot. She did not know whether she ought to feel painful or happy.

Xu Ziling was the first to realize this situation; he knew during sleeping Kou Zhong would spontaneously circulate his qi. "Zhong Shao," he called out softly, "Still haven't restrained your inner qi?"

Kou Zhong obeyed him and woke up. Susu immediately felt a bit better.

By this time the heavy snow had nearly filled the space above the three people to the brim. Naturally Kou and Xu, two boys had no problem. Automatically the true qi within their body reacted; the breathing from their mouth and nose was severed, they entered the inner-breathing state like a fetus. However, Susu did not have this kind of ability; she felt drowsy very quickly. "I am stuffy!" she moaned.

Xu Ziling was about to push the snow out to let Susu breathe a bit of fresh air. A multitude of footsteps was coming near, someone spoke, "Drain the pond water, I heard they are proficient in breathing-under-water skill, perhaps they are still hiding at the bottom of the pond. Humph! Let me search this pond carefully one more time."

Recognizing the voice as belonging to Xu Shiji, how could the three people dare to move? Listening to Susu's breathing that was increasingly short and hurried, the two boys were greatly anxious. If this condition continued, just the sound of her breathing would be enough to alert the enemy; not to mention she might be suffocated to death.

They heard the sound of rushing wind; obviously someone was crossing the pond, flying toward the fake rock.

Xu Ziling was facing Susu. Although he could not see Susu's expression due to the thick snow above them, from the heaving of her breasts he knew that she was on the verge of taking her last breath, yet for the sake of the two boys, she fought hard to restrain herself. Critical situation gave birth to quick-wittedness; pressing his lips against her fragrant lips, he transferred his true qi to her.

Susu's tender body trembled a little before calming down. Her icy-cold lips gradually warmed up, as she silently receiving the true qi that made her entire body relaxed.

The three of them felt people were walking back and forth above; hence they were forced to beseech the gods and pray to Buddha that the people above would not step onto the snow covering the hole above their heads; otherwise, they would definitely be able to tell that there was something different with the snow.

'Crash!' Someone opened the sluice, with a loud crash the water flowed out of the pond.

Shen Luoyan's voice was heard from the outside, "I think they have already escaped. With a glance you can already see the bottom of the pond, there is no way anybody could hide in here."

Xu Shiji clearly shared similar impression; he coldly said, "They must be still in the city, we'll mobilize our troops immediately to search for them house-to-house, I want to see where can they go?"

A long time after Shen Luoyan and the others left, Kou Zhong was the first to

stick his big head out of the snow and happily said, "They are all gone!" Only then did Xu Ziling leave Susu's fragrant lips and help her to stand up.

Turned out it was already dawn. Heavy snow was still swirling in the air; the Zhai Mansion had turned into broken-roof crumbling-wall ruins after the fire.

Susu has been sitting with bent knees all night long, her legs went numb. Were it not for Xu Ziling holding her arm, she would not be able to stand.

Noticing the slight blush on Susu's pretty face, plus her bashful demeanor as if she did not dare to look straight at him, Xu Ziling could not help recalling the interlocking of the two sets of lips just now, and some kind of peculiar feeling grew in his originally pure heart.

How could Kou Zhong be willing to let him get away with it just like that? Leaning closer to Susu, he whispered in her ear, "Jiejie was kissed by Xiao Ling, how about letting him marry you?"

"Don't talk nonsense," Susu snapped at him, "Xiao Ling was doing that to save my life! How can you say that?"

Kou Zhong slapped his forehead and remorsefully said, "I deserve the scolding! I nearly forget that when sister-in-law is drowning, we must lend a helping hand. [Translator's note: I believe he was referring to Confucianism restriction in man-woman relationship.] Therefore, in this situation Xiao Ling was also helping Jiejie ... hey! There is nothing strange about it."

Susu turned around planted a very light kiss [orig. the dragonfly touches the water lightly] on Kou Zhong's lips; she spoke tenderly, "This way I treat you fairly. Don't laugh at Xiao Ling again."

While Kou Zhong was 'as dumb as a wooden chicken', Xu Ziling said, "Don't be ridiculous; right now running away for our lives is more important. What should we do?"

At this time the three of them still had the lower part of their bodies hidden

inside the snow-covered well, only their upper bodies were exposed outside. While helping Susu brushing off the snowflakes from her beautiful hair, Kou Zhong mused, “Now our hope is on the one called Peipei from the Daiqing Lou [sic. It was ‘yuan’ in previous chapters.] But if we go there to look for her just like this, chances are we are going to reveal ourselves. Besides, at the moment we are not able to move a single step within the city of Xingyang. It would be best if we could find a place where we could hide for his mother’s several days, waiting for the smoke to clear, and then when Shen Poniang [b1tch] and the rest think that we have gone far away, we’ll go to Peipei, asking her to find a way. This way it will be absolutely safe.”

With a bitter laugh Xu Ziling said, “Who dares to offer shelter to us now?”

Susu’s voice was trembling, “They said they are going to conduct house-to-house search, it would be better for us to just stay here.”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “In this kind of weather, if we stay here, we will either die of the cold, or die of starvation. Ha! Does Jiejie know where that Shen Luoyan’s thieves’ lair is?”

Susu was shocked. “You are not thinking of hiding in her home, are you?” she asked.

Kou Zhong laughed. “Where can we find a hiding place more secure than her place?” he said, “Right now this b1tch is under Li Mi’s order to search for us, she shouldn’t have time to go home to sleep, we will enter by exploiting this weak spot and put up with her place just for a few days. By the time she goes home, it will mean that the search is over, and then we can go to find Peipei.”

Xu Ziling was greatly moved; he nodded and said, “According to reason, Shen Poniang wouldn’t be so bad that she won’t even spare her own thieves’ lair. This plan is certainly feasible.”

Susu still did not feel at ease. “But there other people in her home!” she said in fear.

“Nothing more than several maids, servants and low-grade workers,” Kou

Zhong proudly replied, “Do you think she will station a massive military force over there, to guard the lady’s chamber like the battlefield? Ha! Xu Shiji coming is another story altogether.”

Finally Susu was persuaded; she told them where Shen Luoyan’s official residence was located.

The three of them waited until dark. This time Kou Zhong carried Susu on his back. Unleashing their Bird Crossing Technique, they leaped onto roofs and vaulted over walls toward Shen Luoyan’s residence to hide.

Book 5 Chapter 2 – Big Hiding Place In The City

Were it not for Susu had once come with Zhai Jiao to call on Shen Luoyan, even if they had her address in hand, perhaps they would have to waste considerable time before they could find this vicious and merciless beauty's fragrant residence.

Shen Luoyan's house was located in a residential area by the eastern city wall, where the buildings were situated next to each other. Including her residence, there were thousands of courtyards surrounded by walls with dark green bricks and dark green roof tiles, linked together by small alleys, taking shape of deep alley between high walls. The alleys were narrow and winding; several hundred streets and alleys winding and turning, criss-crossing each other, and they all paved with large dark green flagstone, which looked virtually the same.

After braving the snow, the three people arrived here and felt that that they were entering a maze; it was difficult to tell one street from another. Particularly during this time of the night, where the only light they could rely on was the dim lantern light coming out from the buildings; it felt even more like entering a ghost area.

But they felt unusually safe instead.

Because in this kind of place, it would be very convenient for them to either fight or stay.

Kou Zhong slipped into an alley and said with a laugh, "That Shen Poniang must have a lot of enemies that she lives in this kind of place that will make

people faint with blurred vision.”

Xu Ziling also felt relaxed. While walking and stretching at the same time, he said, “When I first heard that Shen Poniang’s lover [orig. male adulterer] Xu Shiji said that they were going to conduct house-to-house search, he gave me a real scare. Turns out he was just tooting his horn; if he came to this side, we would go to that side. How could he deal with Wulin martial art masters like us?”

Susu was still having a lingering fear, “Can you not be so carried away like that?” she said, “The people of Xingyang are all fervent supporters of Wagang Army. All it takes is just one person spotting us, and I guarantee that he will report it to them ... oh!”

Before she finished speaking, Kou Zhong already had his arms around her waist and whisked her up to the roof of a building on the left. Xu Ziling also leaped at the same time.

The three of them lay low on the roof and looked down toward the mouth of the alley some distance ahead. Amidst the swirling snowflakes, all they saw was quiet, silent and lonely footprints.

Susu was baffled, “Is there anybody here?” she asked.

Kou Zhong replied in low voice, “My intuition can’t be wrong. It’s really strange, how come I can’t even see anybody’s shadow, I can’t hear anybody’s voice, but I can feel that there is danger approaching?”

Xu Ziling nodded and said, “I also feel a warning in my heart. Look!”

They saw a squad of about a dozen warriors in dark green clothes, coming from the alley on the other side, along the way they knocked on every door. Needless to say, obviously they were looking for the three people.

Watching these men, the three people felt their scalp went numb. This Xu Shiji apparently someone who did what he said he would. By the time the entire city knew about these three fugitives, they would not be able to move a single step.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were not ordinary people, their look was particularly easy to recognize, to conceal it from others would be more difficult than ascending the heavens.

After the search party went far, the three of them cried out inwardly, 'What a close shave!' If it were not for the heavy snow, Xu Shiji only needed to send his men to watch from vantage points, while the other team was conducting house-to-house search, and then even if the three people grew wings, it would still be difficult for them to fly away.

But right now the weather was bitterly cold, plus visibility was very low, naturally Xu Shiji's men only worked halfheartedly.

Gnashing his teeth, Kou Zhong said, "All along we only receive beatings without being able to hit back, greatly damaging our reputation as the Yangzhou's Two Dragons. Since we have Daiqing Lou's Peipei as our way out, we might as well strike back without restraint, making his mother's trouble that will turn the sky and the earth upside down, and thus venting the resentment in our hearts."

Susu was extremely nervous [orig. a bird startled by the mere twang of a bow]; overwhelmed with horror, she said, "How can you do that? How can you fight them?"

Xu Ziling, however, was greatly excited; he said in a low voice, "If you want to be famous, naturally you must establish your prestige. However, we'd better find a dependable hiding place first before making a grand plan."

"Jiejie, come!" Kou Zhong excitedly said.

As soon as Susu was perched on Kou Zhong's back, he brought her soaring into the air like a big bird.

She suddenly had a feeling that she did not have clear understanding of these two brothers of hers. If it were other people, they would either be so terrified that they pulled their heads like a turtle and refused to come out, or with a

thousand ways, a hundred plans would try to escape without a trace. How could they be like these two boys, who were fully aware that the enemy's power was a thousand times, a hundred times bigger than theirs, yet they still had the courage to 'strike back', just like striking a stone with an egg?

Looking at Shen Luoyan's fragrant residence from the outside, there was really no difference from the other houses in the neighborhood, only the door decoration was comparatively more exquisite, unlike the peeling off door and walls of the next door neighbor's.

But the inside was a different story altogether. Not only it was spacious, elegant and pure, the garden and courtyard were integrated into one continuous entity, the layout gave a beautiful and secluded impression, the building displayed original architecture, and was quite distinctive.

The house was called Luoyan Zhuang [lit. falling wild goose manor], where the manor's courtyard was dominated by the main residence hall; water and rock in contrast with one another, pathways and winding corridor were running through rock garden, which also function as separator. The winding path went up and down, what is true and what is false engendered one another.

North of the pond was a small two-story building styled as if it was resting on a hilltop, with five continuous pillars over two levels, and overhanging eaves, like butterfly flapping its wings ready to fly; very unique. Shen Luoyan's boudoir was precisely in that building.

Behind the small two-story building was an artificial stream, with two small bridges connecting the rear court with the maids and servants' apartments, as well as the storehouse.

Luoyan Zhuang did not cover too large of a land, but it was just like a remote, secluded area; simple and unadorned, yet exquisite, and highly poetic.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling jumped over the sidewall into the courtyard, momentarily they were staring in awe. It never occurred to them that Shen Luoyan was the type of person who knew how to enjoy life, her dwelling was rather like a 'Big Hiding Place in the Alley'.

Not too long afterwards, Kou Zhong already gathered the information that the manor only had four young maids, and a pair of husband and wife servants, none of which knew martial art.

The three people finally settled on hiding in a guest room, which seemed like no one has slept in it for a very long time. The most wonderful thing was that this room was already well stocked with everything they needed. The three were not bashful; after drinking enough stolen tea, they fell asleep immediately.

By the time Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were awakened because they heard unusual noise, the day has already brightened.

Kou Zhong moved away Susu's arm, which was resting on his chest, walked over to the window, and peeked outside. Turned out it was the only male servant, sweeping the snow on the yard.

Xu Ziling also got out of bed came over to him; he whispered, "The snow has stopped!"

Without averting his gaze, Kou Zhong asked, "Are you hungry?"

"Hungry as hell!" Xu Ziling replied.

Kou Zhong whispered, "We can't steal food in here, otherwise they will discover us. Let me go out to take care of the food and then I'll come back!"

Xu Ziling said, "Going to the street could be very dangerous."

Kou Zhong laughed, "Don't worry!" he said, "As long as the three of us don't walk together, it won't be that conspicuous. I'll even scout around for the news."

Xu Ziling knew that Kou Zhong was full of craft and cunning, plus he has been hungry since last night, so after warning him repeatedly, he said, "The sooner you go, the sooner you'll come back."

Kou Zhong consented; he then sneaked out of the rear window.

Having nothing to do, Xu Ziling was about to sit cross-legged silently, when from the bed Susu called out, “Li Dage! Li Dage!”

Xu Ziling was startled; he jumped onto the bed to cover Susu’s fragrant lips.

Susu woke up. As soon as she regained her consciousness, her pretty eyes immediately shot a panic-stricken look. When Xu Ziling lifted up his hand, she cried out in low voice, “The enemy’s coming?”

“No!” Xu Ziling shook his head, “But Jiejie was talking in your sleep. I was just afraid you might alert the man sweeping the snow outside.”

Susu was relieved, but then her charming face turned red as she said, “What did I say in my dream?”

Xu Ziling sighed inwardly. “Nothing!” he said indifferently, “It was practically some unintelligible words.”

Susu sat up. Knitting her brows, she asked, “Where is Xiao Zhong?”

After Xu Ziling told her, she began to worry again.

Suddenly there was a sound of footsteps approaching. The two people were scared and busily folded the blankets back to their previous condition, and then they went into hiding under the bed.

They were barely hidden when two young maids came in and started sweeping and dusting, as well as replacing the bedding with a fresh one.

One of the maid said, “Miss has not returned home for eight full days, and last night Longtou Mansion was burned to the ground. And now rumors are flying all around town, making me really worried for Miss.”

Under the bed, Xu Ziling mused that it was other people who should be worried; definitely not that Shen b1tch.

The other maid laughed and said, “Xiao Ju [li'l chrysanthemum], you are worried over nothing. Last night Duke Mi has just deployed the troops to take over Liyang Storehouse. What happened to Longtou Mansion can't be helped; who told old ghost Zhai to be so stubborn that he adamantly refused to abdicate? Speaking about competence, how could he be Duke Mi's match?”

Xiao Ju was astounded, “How could Lan Jie [elder sister orchid] know so clearly?” she asked.

Xiao Lan proudly replied, “Naturally somebody told me!”

Xiao Ju laughed and said, “Must be that guy Li Jie, hee ... hee ... Have you slept with him yet?”

And then chasing and hitting each other the two maids left the room.

Xu Ziling and Susu crawled out of under the bed. Breathing out a sigh of relief, Xu Ziling said, “Li Mi is gone! Other people I am not too scared.”

Susu sat next to him on a long wooden bench; she said, “They have many men, great force, you guys only have two pairs of fists, plus you have to take care of me. You must not be eager to excel and want to show off your heroism!”

Xu Ziling spiritedly replied, “Don't look down on your two Didi; these past two years, I lost count on how many times we met mishaps, but every time we escaped alive from mortal danger, our skill seemed to be getting better. Hey! Jiejie may rest here for a while, I'll go around to take a look.”

Susu hastily grabbed his arm; her voice cracking, “What if someone finds you?”

With a hundred-percent confidence Xu Ziling said, “I have been an expert in imitating the dog and stealing chicken since childhood; I will not make an unwise

move. This is called 'know yourself, know your enemy'. The more we know about our surroundings here, the more confident we will be when something comes up and we have to deal with it."

Susu had no choice but to let him go.

Very scared and on edge she waited for half a sichen [reminder: 1 sichen is 2 hours]; keeping watch alone and was bored, she could not help thinking about Zhai Mansion people who met calamity, thus she cried inwardly. Fortunately Xu Ziling returned with excitement on his face. There was also a folder in his hand.

"All thanks to the skill we learned from Chen Laomou for several days, I managed to find Shen Poniang's treasure she hid inside her secret chamber," he proudly said.

Seeing he came back, the distress and terror in Susu's heart reached its limit. Forcing herself to share his excitement, she asked, "Who's Chen Laomou?"

Xu Ziling sat down and put the precious and heavy folder on his lap; he said, "Chen Laomou was Jukun Bang's man, his specific responsibility was to train the gang member how to steal and gather information, which they would then sell for money. Oh! He is back."

Following his gaze, Susu saw Kou Zhong, with two big bundles in his hands, pushing the door from the anteroom and walked in. Kou Zhong laughed and said, "One bundle of clothes, one bundle of food. Mission successfully accomplished. The most wonderful thing is that all the maids and servants have returned to their apartments in the rear courtyard."

Xu Ziling and Susu cheered together. While they were eating and drinking as much as they liked, Kou Zhong said with radiant delight, "That guy Xu Shiji searched the entire City of Xingyang and nearly turning it upside down; there are checkpoints at the mouth of every street, patrolling troops are everywhere. Seeing the look of things was anything but reassuring, I went to steal from house-to-house, in a random, different parts of the city. I guarantee nobody would suspect anything."

“Xiao Ling also stole something!” Susu said.

Only now did Xu Ziling remember; hurriedly he took out the folder that he stuffed into his pocket earlier and handed over to Kou Zhong. “Look at this,” he said, “Do you think this looks like Shen Poniang’s roster of spies in all parts of the country? Plus there are records of expenditures, big and small, and the amount of money exchanges, that kind of stuff.”

Kou Zhong stuffed the remaining mantou [steamed bun] in his hand into his mouth, freeing up both hands to thumb through the folder. A bit unsure, he said, “Ha! Let my methodical eyes look at it, I guarantee nothing will be hidden from me. This guy’s name is really weird, Chen Siya [lit. dead duck]? Also his address and communication method? Last month he received a hundred taels of silver. Turns out it is that easy to earn money.”

Susu leaned over to take a look. She angrily said, “He is called Chen Shuijia [lit. water armor], not Chen Siya. You randomly change people’s name.”

Kou Zhong’s eyes shone, “Xiao Ling,” he said, “Based on this treasure, do you think we can ruthlessly rip some money off that Shen Poniang?”

Xu Ziling let out a cold snort, “She harmed us like that, how could some money compensate us?”

Horried, Susu said, “If you hand this thing over to the authorities, it will implicate a lot of people; their houses will be searched, their possessions confiscated, their heads chopped off.”

Kou Zhong put the roster into his pocket; he laughed and said, “How can we make things easy for the emperor’s baby boy? As for how we are going to use this thing, let’s think about it later.”

Turning to Xu Ziling, he said, “It’s time for us to change our appearance a little bit. I don’t know who did such a good job in painting our faces, but our three revered countenances are being pasted all over the streets, making our effort to call on Peipei of Daiqing Lou becomes extremely dangerous.”

Xu Ziling said, “Just now in the storage room at the rear court I found ten big earthen jars of kerosene. If we can find that guy Xu Shiji’s house, we can torch it and burn it to the ground; a tooth for a tooth. Oh, and I haven’t told you yet, but Li Mi is out to fight a battle, he is not in town.”

Kou Zhong let out a ‘ya, ya’ laugh like a crow cawing, and said, “Xu Shiji is just a four-legged crawling lackey. Since Li Mi is away, we might as well burn his old nest. Hey, I wonder where that guy Li Mi’s doghouse is anyway.”

Noticing the two boys’ gaze was fixed on her, Susu pouted her lovely lips and tut-tutted, “Don’t even think that I will tell you. You said we are here to keep away from the way the wind blows, if you make such disturbance, everybody will know that we are still in the city. What’s more, Duke of Pusan’s Mansion has martial art experts as numerous as the cloud, if you are going there to create trouble, it will be nothing more than delivering your own lives!”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “This is the most exciting place; they know very well that we are still in the city, but they can’t find us. Even better, right now the military is in a state of emergency, Xu Shiji and the others can’t put us above the war. Therefore, as long as we are able to create internal anxiety for them, I guarantee they will have no room to advance or retreat.”

Xu Ziling added, “It would be better if after setting on the fire, we lure them to pursue us, and we flee out of the city right in front of their eyes. Afterwards we can come back to fetch Jiejie. This will be even more foolproof.”

Kou Zhong frowned and said, “The city wall is so high, can you jump out?”

Xu Ziling dejectedly replied, “I can’t.”

“Pfft!” Susu broke into a giggle. Casting a sidelong glance toward the two boys, she chastised them, “Just a couple of kids who love to fool around.”

Kou Zhong stole a lightning speed kiss on her cheek; he sighed and said, “Jiejie’s eyes can really hook people’s soul!”

At first Susu was beaming with delighted, but then her smile faded; perhaps she remembered Li Jing?

Xu Ziling suddenly said, "Does Jiejie know who is in charge of the city defense?"

"The one really in charge, I do not know," Susu replied, "But city's affairs have always been managed by Xu Shiji, so it ought to be his men."

Kou Zhong was shaken, "I got it!" he said, "Xiao Ling, are you thinking of escaping via the sewer like we did in Yangzhou?"

Susu was shocked, "Down there is so dirty, how could we do that?" she said, "Aren't you going to ask for Peipei's help?"

Xu Ziling said, "Under present circumstances, I am afraid nobody will be willing to help us. Besides, as soon as we go to Daiqing Lou, we will be recognized immediately."

Kou Zhong said, "No good will come of receiving favor from someone like Xiang Yushan. Xiao Ling's idea is really unique. Tonight we are going to Xu Shiji's house to steal, trying our luck. Chen Laomou said that any city must have architectural drawings; otherwise, how are they going to do maintenance and repairs?"

Susu was helpless, "Your prejudice toward Xiang Gongzi is too deep," she said. She proceeded by telling them the location of Xu Shiji's residence, and then she said, "I want to try the clothes that Xiao Zhong brought back." So the two boys slipped out of the room.

After closing the door, Xu Ziling pulled Kou Zhong aside and said, "Just now I heard Su Jie calling Li Dage in her dream. Ay, Jiejie is so forlorn! But in this kind of matter, nobody can help her."

Kou Zhong slumped in silence; he sat down and after thinking long and hard he said, "We'd better go to Luoyang first to look for Li Dage, and tell him directly about Jiejie's situation, see if he has a way to help Jiejie settling down."

Xu Ziling shook his head and said, "That will make Li Dage feel very awkward; once things turn bad, it will also place Jiejie in an awkward position. Furthermore, because of that lowly scum Wang Bodang, Jiejie seems to abandon herself in despair a little. One moment she said she is coming with us, the next moment she speaks up on that fellow Xiang Yushan's behalf. Forcing her to go to Luoyang might be counter-productive."

In this kind of man-woman relationship, Kou Zhong, who was always full of craft and cunning, completely had his hands bound and was unable to do anything about it.

While he was sighing in despair, Susu came out wearing the new clothes. The two boys promptly made a supreme effort to flatter her by saying all good things they could muster.

Although Susu repeatedly laughed charmingly, inevitably there was a trace of unraveled melancholy on her beautiful eyebrows, giving the impression that she was merely forcing herself to look happy.

Kou Zhong finally surrendered, "Does Jiejie still want us to go to Peipei of Daiqing Lou?"

With a not-so-hidden bitterness Susu said, "Does Jiejie have any right to mind your business?"

Naturally the two boys understood her intention; busily they made an oath and swore that they would listen to her opinion in handling this matter. Only then did Susu's joyous expression return. And then they discussed how to evade the patrolling troops' eyes and ears to find this woman named Peipei.

Kou Zhong came up with an idea, "How about we go to the silk fabric store and buy a set of highest-quality silk brocade, and indicate that this is a present for Peipei. We will tail the delivery guy and see who will receive the gift, then we ought to know which one is Peipei."

Susu frowned and said, "But if the silk fabric store people recognize you as the fugitive wanted by Wagang Army, won't you harm Peipei instead?"

Kou Zhong was ready with the answer, "Inevitably there will be people who don't have the least bit concern over the matters of the world, or perhaps they are simply ignorant. When I went out to steal Jiejie's new clothes, one of the clothing store's bosses was an old man who looks as if his vision is already blurred of age; he is relying on two young lads to deliver the goods. As long as we wait until he is alone in the store, our great plan can be executed."

Susu happily said, "It would be even better if I pretend to be Peipei's young maid and am doing my Miss' shopping; it would be more foolproof."

Noticing she was regaining her vitality, Kou Zhong laughed and said, "But Jiejie cannot wear this clothes!"

Susu began to realize that she was the dirty rotten thief who wore the stolen clothes from that exact store. Smiling sheepishly she returned to the room to change.

The two boys looked at each other with wry smile. Xu Ziling sighed and said, "I do hope Jiejie does not take a fancy to Xiang Yushan! You saw it yourself, as soon as we agreed to look for Peipei, her entire personality changed instantly."

Full of confidence, Kou Zhong said, "Which part of that Xiang guy deserves Jiejie taking a fancy of? In my opinion, she is just bursting with joy from knowing that we won't take the risk of going to Xu Shiji's house to set fire and steal things, and also from knowing that we esteem her opinion!"

Not too long afterwards Susu came out wearing suitable clothes. The three of them hence went out of their hiding place. Avoiding several groups of Wagang Army troops, they reached the small alley across the street from the clothing store.

Susu went in according to plan, while the two boys waited in a dark corner, ready to render assistance if needed.

The snow was falling again, the streets were deserted; it was so peaceful that it felt like nothing had ever happened.

But Xu Ziling knew that the Wagang Army, whose fame was currently at its height, has already developed irreparable rifts internally due to Zhai Rang's murder. He could easily imagine that because Zhai Rang was the initiator of Wagang Army, no matter how well Li Mi won the people's heart, he could not entirely displace Zhai Rang's deep-rooted influence of the past. Inevitably disloyalty would grow among his men who had always been following Zhai Rang in the past.

Meanwhile, Kou Zhong was also thinking about Li Mi. He recalled Zhai Rang's remark about him being not ruthless enough, and thus he failed in his fight against Li Mi. Therefore, is being 'vicious and merciless' the most important prerequisite one must have if one wants to contend for control over the land under the heavens?

While he was entranced in his own thought, Xu Ziling called out softly, "This is bad!"

Kou Zhong was startled; his alertness returned, he looked toward the street, and the first thing that caught his eyes was Shen Luoyan, with her phoenix-like beauty and grace. And then his eyes were drawn into the girl in the prime of youth by Shen Luoyan's side.

At first glance this girl did not look too pretty; perhaps because her silhouette was reminiscent of a man. But her skin was snow white, glowing with healthy pink; her demeanor was noble and elegant, her legs long and her waist slender, she was approximately two cun taller than Shen Luoyan, she had bright eyes and white teeth, and all these features fit together perfectly, making her not the least bit inferior to Shen Luoyan, forming a very unique personality traits.

In front and behind the two women were their attendants. They were strolling down the street, with Shen Luoyan pointing here and there while talking and laughing with her; it seemed that Shen Luoyan was acting as her tour guide.

In about ten paces or so the women and their party would reach the door of the clothing store where Susu was. The two boys' hands automatically reached the hilt of their weapons. Their scalp went numb as they watched step-by-step the enemy approaching the dangerous position where they would be able to see

Susu.

Right this critical moment [orig. a thousand catty hanging on a thread], that healthy-looking, carefree beautiful woman suddenly halted her steps. Without showing any emotion she spoke to Shen Luoyan and then she stepped into the arts and crafts store right next door to the clothing store. Shen Luoyan cheerfully followed her inside.

Those dozen or so attendants spread out; a small number of them followed the women inside, while the rest of them stood around the door, assuming bodyguards position.

In the meantime Susu has just walked out of the clothing store. Seeing a bunch of armed men gathered outside the shop next door, she was terrified. Hanging her head low, she hurriedly crossed the street toward the alley where the two boys were waiting for her.

The men did not pay her any attention. As soon as she was out of sight of the enemy, she met with the two boys. Her face paled as she said, "I am scared to death!"

Having just recovered from a shock, the two boys pulled her deeper into the small alley. Once they were well hidden, Kou Zhong whispered, "Success?"

Susu nodded, "No problem. But the boss said that it is too late today, they will deliver the goods tomorrow."

Xu Ziling sighed. "That would be bad," he said, "Pleasure house girls sleep all day. If the delivery is received by other person, our effort will be wasted."

Pleased with herself, Susu said, "Don't worry! I already gave him instruction that the goods are to be delivered within shenshi [between 3-5pm] hour tomorrow. That old man already promised!"

For lack of better option, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had no choice but to take Susu back 'home'.

Book 5 Chapter 3 – The Shadow Assassin

Returning to the beautiful, secluded, elegant and calm Shen residence, the three of them had a feeling like they had just escaped alive from a mortal danger. Also, recalling that tomorrow they were going to find Peipei, they felt that their situation was not as hopeless, without any way out, as before; therefore, their mood was greatly improved. Giggling and laughing the two boys narrated to Susu their nearly two years of experience. The more the listener was engrossed in the story, the more the story tellers were getting excited. In the blink of an eye it was already evening.

The Shen Mansion was bright with palace lanterns everywhere, the front and rear courtyards were as bright as daylight.

After eating their dinner, Kou Zhong lazed around on a chair and contentedly said, “Jiejie really loves cleanliness, you even swept this room, inside and out, clean. If it were us, we would not do that.”

Susu stared at him blankly, “How could I have spare time to think of such thing?” she said, “It was those people this morning who came here to clean up!”

Kou Zhong suddenly sat up with a start. “Oh, no!” his voice broke.

Stunned, Xu Ziling and Susu looked at him.

Kou Zhong said, “When we got here yesterday, the room was full of dust, obviously it hasn’t been occupied for a long time. Now all of a sudden somebody came in to clean up, evidently there will be guest who is going to stay here!”

Xu Ziling cursed his own negligence inwardly; he sprang up and said, "Must be Shen Poniang is going to entertain that beauty whom she accompanied just now. No wonder it is so bright outside. Come! We must quickly tidy up and sneak out."

While the three people were busy tidying up the room, they heard faint hoof beats and voices from the front courtyard. Shen Luoyan and her guest have arrived.

Not daring to tarry any longer, while Shen Luoyan was still at the front yard, the three of them hastily hid themselves in another firewood shed behind their building.

Sure enough, a moment later they saw people entered the guest house; occasionally they even heard voices and the sound of movements.

All the lanterns in the four rooms of the guest house were lit. The three people no longer felt safe. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling took turn monitoring the activity outside. In the meantime, the snow stopped. Apparently the guests have settled down, because they did not hear as much activity as before.

Kou Zhong, who was peeking out through a small window, suddenly signaled a warning. Xu Ziling and Susu hastily crowded next to him in front of the window. The three of them looked out together.

They saw Shen Luoyan leading the energetic-looking, alluring and youthful girl, walking toward the small garden right outside the firewood shed. The former started the conversation, "Luoyan loves to see the scene of prodigious abundance of fruit the most, hence I planted mostly fruit trees."

"Yan Jie is very thoughtful," the woman praised, "Who would have thought that unexpectedly there is such a world-class scenic spot deep in these alleys?"

Shen Luoyan modestly replied, "Yuzhi please don't laugh at me, your Song Family's Huai [Chinese scholar tree/Japanese pagoda tree/Sophora Japonica] Garden is ranked among the top ten gardens of the Wulin; how can my tiny nest be compared to that?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were shaken; it was only now did they realize that this charming and independent beauty belonged to the Song Clan. They were wondering what her relation to Song Shidao was.

The two women stopped to enjoy the icicles hanging from the tree branches.

Song Yuzhi nonchalantly said, "This time Yuzhi pays a visit, based on Yan Jie's ability and wisdom, you ought to be able to guess one or two reasons?"

Shen Luoyan muttered to herself irresolutely, "I wonder if it has something to do with Yuwen Huaji start rumors and create trouble in front of that muddleheaded ruler?"

Song Yuzhi laughed and said, "I knew we can't hide it from Yan Jie; but that is only one of the reasons."

Shen Luoyan slyly said, "In that case the other reason must be related to Du Fuwei. I heard that after capturing Liyang, he cut the Yangtze River's water traffic, by wantonly and indiscriminately looting the sailing vessels. According to our information, they even confiscated three of your salt ships! Is that true?"

Song Yuzhi was indifferent. "Yan Jie is indeed very well informed," she said, "No wonder Duke Mi relies heavily on you!"

Shen Luoyan shook her head and sighed, "I really don't understand what's inside Du Fuwei's head; while Yang Guang's main force is establishing their presence east of the River, he still has the audacity to provoke such a powerful enemy such as your precious Clan. Perhaps he is tired of living?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling suddenly understood. Yangtze River was the Song Clan's lifeline in transporting the salt. By cutting off the salt ship traffic, Du Fuwei has greatly threatened the reputation, as well as the livelihood of the Song Clan. Therefore, the Song Clan sent Song Yuzhi with special mission to link with Li Mi, so that with north and south's joint forces they could attack Liyang's Jianghuai [River Huai] Army, headed by Du Fuwei and his lieutenant Fu Gongshi, from two fronts.

But presently Wagang Army was suffering from internal strife, plus they were facing Sui Army's counteroffensive, therefore, chances are Li Mi would not have time to take care Du Fuwei.

Song Yuzhi smiled and said, "Du Fuwei thinks he is forced by circumstances, but he shouldn't have provoked our Song Family. We have time and again negotiated with Du and Fu, two men, all failed to grasp the main points. My father is extremely furious over this matter, he determined not to spare anything in giving a good lesson to Du Fuwei. However, because he does not know Duke Mi's intention, he sent Yuszhi to have an audience with Duke Mi."

Shen Luoyan sighed and said, "Yuzhi should be aware that we always have mutual apprehension toward Jianghuai Army ...?"

Song Yuzhi cut her off, "According to our latest information, after the Jianghuai Army captured Liyang, unexpectedly they hold back their troops without moving, simply constantly consolidating their foothold of the area. Indeed their motive is unpredictable. Did Yan Jie hear about it?"

Shen Luoyan said, "Is Yuzhi referring to Du Fuwei's desire to wait for Yang Guang to be impatient and turn his attention to deal with us?"

Song Yuzhi was still indifferent, "Only this matter is not enough to make Yang Guang deal with you."

And then abruptly she changed the topic, "I wonder if Yan Jie has ever heard of certain Qu Ao [lit. proud/arrogant song], a Tiele[1] man?"

Shen Luoyan was surprised, "Is Yuzhi talking about Qu Ao, the Da Kui [lit. big helmet], who run amuck on the western border? This man's fame is resounding; very soon he will catch up to Tujue's Wu Zun Bi Xuan. I am afraid that Du Fuwei's invitation cannot even move him. I wonder why Yuzhi suddenly mention this person."

Song Yuzhi seriously said, "That was then, now it is different. Tiele people have always been mortal enemy of the Tujue people; seeing the Tujue's influence in

the Central Plains is growing deeper has sprouted their ambition to get a share of the cup of soup. Qu Ao has received Tiele King's secret mission to connect with new rising powers of the Central Plains, with the hope of fishing in troubled water, and acquire a little bit of profit."

Knitting her brows, Shen Luoyan asked, "Qu Ao really has any regards toward Du Fuwei?"

Calmly and confidently Song Yuzhi replied, "Not only that, they even conspire to assassinate Duke Mi. If they succeeded, Yang Guang would definitely take advantage while Wagang Army is in chaos, to go all out to attack you. At that time Du Fuwei would also seize that opportunity to absorb the scattering Wagang Army's troops, and then expand his influence to the north. Otherwise, the longer your Wagang Army exists, the more difficult it will be for Du Fuwei to expand northward."

Just by looking at Shen Luoyan's expression, Kou Zhong and the others knew that this Qu Ao was no trivial matter.

Meanwhile, someone hurriedly came to report that Xu Shiji has arrived. Thereupon the two women went toward the front courtyard.

Kou Zhong followed the two women with his eyes as they disappeared into the woods, dyed white by the snow and the frost. Breathing a mouthful of cold air he said, "We might as well change profession to become assassins; it is the most profitable business. At least it will be a clean job, not as messy [orig. wading in mud and water] as stealing people's belonging to blackmail them."

Recalling Shen Luoyan's secret roster, Xu Ziling was anxious. "If Shen Poniang found out that her roster is gone, it would be extremely bad," he said, "We can forget about escaping out of town."

"Looks like stealing that ghost thing not worth the risk we'll have to take," Kou Zhong admitted, "Hee ...! But how could she guess that it was us who took it?"

Xu Ziling thought Kou Zhong was right. He laughed and said, "This is called empty evil intention."

But Susu was anxious endlessly; she said, “We’d better secretly put that roster back where it came from! The most urgent matter right now is sneaking out of the city; it’s always better to have one less thing to worry!”

Listening to her, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly moved.

When Xu Ziling stole the roster, his first intention was only for fun and perhaps to exact revenge on Shen Luoyan; essentially he had never thought about any benefit from extorting her with this roster. Better yet, right now both Shen Luoyan and Xu Shiji were in the main building’s hall; considering it was an easy trip on a familiar path for Xu Ziling, returning the roster to its original place should not be a difficult task.

Kou Zhong said, “Su Jie’s order, we should follow.”

Susu’s mind was filled with conflicting thoughts, “But there are so many people out there,” she said hesitantly, “If you walk around in the courtyard, people might see you!”

Xu Ziling also expressed his lack of confidence in himself, “What should we do then?” he asked.

Kou Zhong patted his chest, “This is called ‘intention can be regarded as unintentional’. There is benefit in many people present: it is comparatively easier to fish in troubled waters. Su Jie can stay here, we will be back soon.”

The two boys slipped out of the firewood shed. Under cover of the trees, they swiftly walked toward Shen Luoyan’s private chamber.

[1] Tiele is the ancient name of people living to the north of China and in Central Asia. Other names include Chi’le, Gaoche, Dingling and Tele (or Teleg).

Unleashing the full potential of the true qi within their body, in an instant their spirit and mind reached the highest boundary. Not only their eyes, ears, nose and other senses were several times sharper, rarer still was that they had some

kind of perception, which transcended physical senses.

This was exactly the mystery of the ‘Secret to Long Life’, which was beyond the context of the general martial art study. Not only it surpassed the self-sufficient treasure trove hidden deep within oneself mentioned by Yi Jian Dashi [see Book 1 Chapter 3] Fu Cailin, it even reached the ‘oneness of heaven and humanity’ realm, which people who practiced martial art spent their lifetime striving to achieve.

Since time immemorial, people whose innate talent surpassed others like Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were extremely rare. By coincidence, they had the opportunity to train the ‘knowledge’ from the ‘Secret to Long Life’, which has long been called a scam, and made a breakthrough into the extreme boundary of first-class martial art skill, attainable only by Ning Daoqi, Bi Xuan, and the like, people who were able to understand the realm of ‘divine truth’.

Therefore, in just two short years, each of them doggedly trained their respective method and achieved unique mental cultivation in martial art, which has time and again helped them avoid great catastrophe.

This moment, for instance, even though there were numerous martial art experts surrounding them like a cloud, relying on their unique senses, they were able to ‘sniff’ danger one step ahead, and their hearts automatically guided them another way to evade the enemy’s detection. Not even for an instant did they ever stir up the alertness of the martial art masters in the house.

Naturally at this point in time the two boys did not have such a clear understanding of what was going on. They only thought that their own qinggong was so superb that they were this formidable.

They swiftly crossed the rear courtyard, along the side of the guesthouse, and straight toward the main garden in front of Shen Luoyan’s private chamber.

Crouching in a cluster of underbrush, they focused all their power into their ears to listen carefully, and immediately ascertained that there was no one inside the second floor of the building.

Although there was not a trace of noise inside, they saw faint lantern light coming from downstairs.

Xu Ziling said, "I'll go upstairs to return the folder, you stay here and be on the lookout for me."

Kou Zhong nodded.

Xu Ziling looked around, and after he was sure that there was nobody around, fast as a ghost he leaped out of the underbrush and flitted toward the main door of the small building; pushing the door open, he slipped in.

Just as expected, the hall was quite with no one in sight; coupled with light from the palace lanterns, the room exuded some kind of tranquil sensation. But Xu Ziling did not dare to hesitate; he swiftly flew upstairs.

At this moment there was only emptiness in his heart and mind, no thought no reasoning. It was not a deliberate state of mind on his part, but it simply arose spontaneously.

He had just stepped into the small hall in front of Shen Luoyan's private chamber, when a hard-to-describe feeling suddenly burst forth in his heart.

He could not explain what he felt, just that it was very uncomfortable, as if there was an invisible pressure disturbing his clear-water-reflecting-the-moon state of mind.

Xu Ziling's consciousness suddenly arose to its upper limit, his true qi flooded his meridians; without the slightest hesitation he drew his short halberd.

The hall brightened instantly.

It was not because someone lighted the lantern at all, but because of the true qi at work in his body, his eyesight sharpened considerably. As he scanned the room down, even the dust particle remained on the floor after being swept could not escape his sharp eyes.

It was a new level that Xu Ziling has never been able to reach before.

Previously, although frequently he was able to multiply his reaction speed due to applying the entire power within his body, he has never been able to reach the clarity like he did this time.

It was not only because this time he had reached the extremely-still state of mind, but most importantly it was because he sensed an enormous danger.

The most frightening thing was that this sense of danger flashed across his heart, and then immediately vanished. Like right now, he suddenly felt the situation was no longer threatening.

After scanning the floor back and forth several times, Xu Ziling's eyes faintly saw some kind of clues; thereupon he scanned the floor again very carefully.

Immediately his heart shivered in fear.

Turned out in several places on the floor he caught a glimpse of a pair of dust traces, so tiny that it was nearly invisible. It appeared that someone was using the tip of his toes flitted over out of Shen Luoyan's private chamber and stopped at the top of the stairs.

Thinking to this point, a dark shadow suddenly flashed out of the room.

Xu Ziling was not someone who had never seen a battle, but he had never thought that there was such a terrifying martial art skill in the world.

By the time he realized that he was under attack, his entire body had already fallen into some kind of whirlpool with nearly irresistible power. Hundreds, thousands of strands of forces; some pulled him forward, some pressed him back, still some acting laterally and rotationally. It just felt like falling into a vortex in the midst of a raging sea, where it was impossible for anybody to have any control of anything.

Fortunately Xu Ziling was one step ahead since before the attack came he was already on guard; otherwise perhaps by this time he was already swaying indeterminately from side to side, and was unable to stand steadily. Knowing that this was the critical moment, without even thinking Xu Ziling transferred all his strength into the short halberd in his hand. Leaning over, he assumed a horse stance, while at the same time he stabbed at the incoming person and looked up at him.

Momentarily, all he could see was a dark shadow.

And one dot of the tip of the sword, which was growing fast in front of his eyes.

A sword qi, which no stronghold can overcome, burst out of the sword, making his breathing stop, and his whole body felt like it was cut in two.

From the moment Xu Ziling climbed the stairs to get here and detected that something was wrong to the time this dreadful adversary mounted a sneak attack on him, it was only two blinks of an eyelid, yet it already caused Xu Ziling to fall into dangerous situation that he had never encountered in his whole life.

When the blade of the short halberd in his hand was about to block the enemy's weapon, the opponent's sword suddenly changed direction; unexpectedly Xu Ziling's short halberd struck empty air.

This kind of situation, where he used incorrect amount of force that the momentum was out of his control, was very uncomfortable that Xu Ziling almost vomited blood.

The enemy was out of his line of vision.

Fortunately, utilizing his crystal clear senses he knew that by some strange and inscrutable footwork, the opponent has moved to the blind spot on his left.

The strangest thing was that his eyes were still seeing a little bit of the sword tip, which was flashing continuously so that although his eyes were open yet he

felt as if he was blind, and was only able to react relying purely on his feeling.

A stream of tapering sword qi seemed to be moving to stab the small of his back from the left side.

Such a formidable body movement and sword stance was definitely terrifying to the extreme. How could Xu Ziling take his time to think? Withdrawing his short halberd that was striking empty air, he twisted his body and hacked; while at the same time he turned his head around to look at this frightening enemy.

A shadow flashed. For the second time in a row Xu Ziling's short halberd struck empty air.

This time Xu Ziling was a bit smarter. Before the force reached its limit, he immediately changed his stance, while swiftly moved back.

He did not have any intention to run away at all; rather, he wanted to stabilize his footings.

Although it was only two moves, he had done everything he could, staking his little life to fight bravely to the end.

Suddenly the sword tip seemed to swell; four sides eight directions seemed to be full of howling and flashing sword rays, what is true and what is false was hard to fathom.

But Xu Ziling was able to clearly grasp that not only the opponent was right in front of him, the frightening sword was also moving at lightning speed toward his lower abdomen.

The opponent's speed was clearly several notches above his, so that even if he retreated swiftly, the initiative was still in the opponent's hands. In this life-and-death border, Xu Ziling moved the short halberd to bring out the short halberd's rotational characteristic, by twisting it and striking at the blade of the opponent's stabbing sword.

Since the battle began, it was the first time that he came in contact with the opponent's weapon in a tangible way. Due to the short halberd's unique structure, supposedly it was the best way to lock the enemy's weapon.

Who could have thought that as the halberd and sword clashed, none of his expectation happened?

First of all, Xu Ziling felt that his true qi, which was concentrated on the body of the halberd, was very quickly sucked dry by the enemy's sword; afterwards the sucking force of the enemy's sword grew so that he was unable to yank his halberd back, even if he tried.

At this critical moment Xu Ziling did not panic; he was about to abandon his halberd and flee for his life when the opponent's sword, with the halberd still attached to it, like a viper rose up and stabbed toward his lower abdomen.

Book 5 Chapter 4 – Stealth Dragon Turns Into Phoenix

After Xu Ziling left, Kou Zhong's attention was focused on the front courtyard, with the idea of as soon as there was any unusual movement, he would immediately meow like a cat to alert Xu Ziling to flee.

Looking at Xu Ziling's full confidence as he pushed the door and went in, Kou Zhong also thought that this matter would be easy and effortless. He was even thinking that when they left the town the next day, he wanted to 'lead away a goat in passing', and steal the roster a second time, to inflict damage to Shen Luoyan by giving something to be anxious about.

This kind of cold and ruthless woman [orig. completely lacking any feeling or sense of justice], even if she killed him, she would not let even half a sigh for him. Kou Zhong could not help thinking about Li Xiuning, and found out that her impression in his heart has been diluted considerably, unlike previously, where it was wind-around-his-dream and bound-his-soul kind of profound feeling.

Right this moment, from the second story of the small building in front of him suddenly came the noise of clashing qi and rousing battle. Kou Zhong was shocked. No longer cared whether people would see him or not, he raised his saber and rushed upstairs.

'Bang!' Following the sound of falling weapon, Xu Ziling's back crashed onto the large window of Shen Luoyan's private chamber, carrying with it a splash of blood, and continued dropping down.

In that split second Kou Zhong recalled Xu Ziling's remark, 'If Xu Ziling is

injured, would he, Kou Zhong, still be able to maintain the ‘moon in the well’ mental state?’

Like a ghost dark shadow flashed out to pursue the falling Xu Ziling, with one palm hacked down, splitting the air. Obviously his intention was to kill.

Kou Zhong forced himself not to think about what fate befell Xu Ziling; he quickly focused his mind and threw the saber in his hand out toward the enemy, while he himself swiftly flew toward Xu Ziling’s body, and shouted, “Help! Thief!”

It was the full display of the superiority of Kou Zhong’s cunning and quick-wits. He knew that since the opponent was able to badly injure Xu Ziling in such a short period of time, he, Kou Zhong, was definitely not able to stop the enemy. The only way was to alert the people in Shen Luoyan’s residence, to give the enemy, whose movements were so stealthy, a little bit of concern.

Of course, there was always the possibility that this person was the hidden troop planted by Shen Luoyan herself; however, seeing how this person also wanted to keep his movement a secret, that possibility was not too great. In the twinkling of an eye Kou Zhong already drew up a strategy, which sole purpose was to save Xu Ziling’s little life.

That person apparently had never expected he would come across such a vicious opponent like Kou Zhong; because based on his astonishing sense of hearing, any movement in the flower garden should not be able to escape his detection. Yet the fact was that not until Kou Zhong shot his big saber did he realize his presence.

Actually, it was also one of the reasons the intention to kill Xu Ziling emerged in his heart. It was not until Xu Ziling pushed the door and entered the second floor did his senses detect his presence. Thereby he came to himself with a start that this kid was anything but.

He was actually not a narrow-minded or someone who was jealous of others more talented than he was, it’s just that he misunderstood Xu Ziling as Shen Luoyan’s man. Hence he tried with everything he had to kill Xu Ziling.

This person was precisely the world-famous 'Shadow Assassin' Yang Xuyan. In this mission he was hiding in Shen Luoyan's private chamber, the main purpose was to assassinate Shen Luoyan, so that when the Sui Army deal a blow to the Wagang Army's old nest later on, they would gain the upper hand. However, because he saw Xu Ziling's profound expertise, his assassination target changed. So it was obvious that he thought highly of Xu Ziling.

Like a flash of lightning the long saber shot toward his flank just below his ribs. The saber's blade emitted a dense, cold qi, which completely enveloped his body even before it reached him. With Yang Xuyan's ability, he still had no choice but to postpone pursuing Xu Ziling and killing him, and had to use his entire strength to deal with this attack.

While midair, suddenly his body twisted, surprisingly he was able to catch the long saber. In the meantime, Kou Zhong already arrived at the spot where Xu Ziling was about to land, and was able to catch him.

Yang Xuyan let out a cold snort and threw the long saber he caught straight toward Kou Zhong's back. Based on the force he exerted, he was confident this saber would skewer both men.

Without even thinking Kou Zhong pushed the ground with his toes, and still hugging Xu Ziling, who by this time was drenched in his own blood and has fell into a coma, he rolled toward a nearby underbrush, and thus missing the lightning fast shooting saber by a hairbreadth.

Yang Xuyan was about to continue pursuing the two boys when from all around he heard sound of flapping sleeves and rustling clothes against the wind. After a short contemplation, he realized that he would not be able to kill Kou Zhong in one or two short moves, thereupon he sighed; unleashing his qinggong he soared into the air.

Kou Zhong brought Xu Ziling rolling toward the other end of the underbrush. As he jumped up and about to flee, he suddenly came face to face with the most difficult decision he had to take in his whole life.

If he ran back to the woodshed where Susu was hiding, he was sure they could

not escape everybody's eyes and ears, plus Xu Ziling would not receive the medical treatment he so desperately needed and might die from his heavy wounds.

But if he ran away immediately, Susu would be isolated and without help, and it would be very easy for the enemy to find her.

What should he do?

Shen Luoyan's tender voice was heard from above, "Who dares to cause trouble?" Followed by the sound of clashing weapons in succession, and a miserable grunt!

Kou Zhong felt pain so deep that he nearly cried. Clenching his teeth, he brought Xu Ziling toward the outer wall and leaped out. Sounds of shouting and yelling immediately followed him, but he was simply unable to deal with anything else.

Kou Zhong ripped open Xu Ziling's outer garments, and what he saw was the pierced roster.

This place was the storeroom at the rear courtyard of a residential building nearby, which scale was comparable to Shen Luoyan's. After evading the pursuing troops, Kou Zhong brought Xu Ziling to hide in here.

Kou Zhong cried out inwardly for their luck; were it not for the roster blocking the sharp and powerful sword qi, perhaps Xu Ziling had already breathed his last.

He laid Xu Ziling on the grass; his eyes closed, his face pale as death, but surprisingly his breathing was still unusually even and soft, not urgent and harsh. Kou Zhong set the roster aside, tore his own clothes, and upon careful examination, he found that Xu Ziling's wound has already closed up and no more seeping blood.

Feeling relieved, Kou Zhong pressed his palms against Xu Ziling's, and quietly transferred his true qi into Xu Ziling's body, hoping to help him recover faster.

After nobody knows how long, Xu Ziling breathed out a mouthful of air, and regained his consciousness; his face was also back to its original color.

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted; he could not hold tears of joy from streaming down his face as he exclaimed sorrowfully, "Xiao Ling! Xiao Ling! You scared me to death!"

Xu Ziling opened his eyes. Aghast, he asked, "What is this place?"

Kou Zhong busily explained. Xu Ziling's countenance changed, "How could you leave Su Jie alone in there?"

Kou Zhong mumbled, "I had no choice but to do it. Don't worry! You stay here and rest, I will get Su Jie and bring her here."

Xu Ziling was upset, "Then what are you waiting for? Su Jie's guts is so small, she must be really frightened."

Kou Zhong reached out to pat Xu Ziling's cheeks. Out of habit he reached behind his back to fetch his long saber, but naturally he was only touching the empty scabbard, and immediately remembered that he did not have the treasure with which he could protect his body anymore.

He was just about to leave, Xu Ziling suddenly called him back. The blood drained from his face; he said, "No need to go!"

Kou Zhong was stunned.

Xu Ziling sighed and said, "Based on Shen Luoyan's astuteness, from the short halberd I left behind upstairs, she would immediately know that it was our doing. But when she saw that only the two of us escaping, how could she not guess that Su Jie must be somewhere in the vicinity? Therefore, I guarantee 100% that by now Su Jie has already fallen into her hands."

"What should we do then?" Kou Zhong dejectedly asked.

Xu Ziling struggled to sit up; he said, “Just help me circulating my qi, by daybreak we will go together to Shen Luoyan to get Su Jie back.”

‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ The brass ring was banged against the main gate of Shen Luoyan’s mansion. And then Kou Zhong’s voice followed, “Lovely wife Luoyan, your husband Zhong Shaoye is back!”

Not too long afterwards, the main gate opened; surprisingly enough, only Shen Luoyan, one person, gracefully stood at the door, her jade countenance was as cold as the ice and snow outside, as she glowered at the giggling Kou Zhong.

Naturally Kou Zhong knew that the other people were preparing an inescapable net, so that even if he grew wings he still could not fly away.

Shen Luoyan coldly said, “Hand the roster over first, and then we can talk about other things.”

Only from this one sentence Kou Zhong knew that Susu had indeed fallen into Shen Luoyan’s hands; otherwise, how could she be that sure that the roster was in their hands?

Kou Zhong shook his head and said with a sigh, “Were it not for Xiao Ling blocking that guy from last night’s sword for you, you, beautiful woman, would have been dead. And now as soon as we met you already show no trace of politeness. Ay! A beauty like you looking down on a man like me, that is normal. But someone completely lacking any feeling or sense of justice like you, that is certainly unprecedented and never be duplicated!”

Shen Luoyan’s countenance returned to normal. “Chi!” a giggle escape her mouth as she said, “I am really at a loss on how to catch you, these two little demons; unexpectedly you had an idea of hiding in my place. All right! Hand the roster back to me, Nujia will return your Su Jie back to you, I will also give you free rein to leave town. As for what happen in the future, you’ll just have to rely on your good fortune.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Shen Beauty, you really know how to crack a

joke; you knew that since Xiao Ling is injured, we can't go very far. Ha! Let me tell you the truth: Xiao Ling is all right. Look! Isn't that him standing behind you?"

Shen Luoyan sighed, "Please don't put on an act," she said, "Xiao Ling left a large pool of blood, you aren't deceiving anybody. Based on the 'Shadow Assassin' Yang Xuyan's skill, if hit by his piercing blow and did not die, he could be considered the first!"

Kou Zhong cheered inwardly; it was precisely the remark he was expecting.

Assuming a grieving and indignant look, he glowered at her and said, "Turns out that guy is Yang Xuyan!"

Shen Luoyan's delicate body shivered a little bit, her elegant eyes shot an incomparably complex expression, but immediately she collected herself as she said in heavy voice, "Don't lie to me. Xu Ziling is dead, isn't he?"

Kou Zhong indeed wanted to lead her to have this misconception, so that in her eyes, he was the only person who knew the secret of the Duke Yang Treasure.

Pretending to struggle hard in suppressing the pain and grief in his heart, he shook his head and said, "Don't make a random guess; the roster is precisely in his hands. If Su Jie and I can go back safely, I guarantee that he will immediately give you the roster back; otherwise, after certain time limit, he will immediately run away and hand the roster over to Yang Guang. If that happens, your Wagang Army will have your spy network broken, and you will become deaf and blind."

Shen Luoyan hung down her pretty face, but she still pursued on, "Is Xiao Ling dead?"

Finally Kou Zhong detected her unusual expression. 'Could it be that she is in love with Xiao Ling?' he mused. But then he convinced himself that that was not the case, because she had always treated them, the two boys, viciously and mercilessly. Even if he was letting his imagination running wild, he simply could not believe this aspect.

Displaying his perfect acting skill, Kou Zhong suddenly shouted, “Don’t ask! Are you or are you not going to hand her over?”

Shen Luoyan slowly lifted up her pretty face; her eyes shot a deep, dense cold ray that made others shudder. But the tone of her voice was incomparably tranquil, “No need to lie to me, Xiao Ling is dead. If I catch you, I guarantee I will find the roster in your possession.”

Kou Zhong threw his head backward and laughed sorrowfully. From his pocket he took out the roster, which was rolled up and was bound with a piece of bloodstained cloth. Holding it horizontally across his chest, he said, “Do your worst! If you could retrieve an intact roster, I will change my name.”

Shen Luoyan’s eyes fell on the bloody roster; her delicate body trembled again. “Where is his body?” she whispered.

Kou Zhong couldn’t help but wonder, “When he was alive I didn’t see you care about him, now that he is dead, you peppered me with questions. What is this all about?”

Shen Luoyan’s phoenix eyes turned cold. “This is none of your business,” she coldly said, “Just give me back my roster, I will let you and Susu leave. I guarantee nobody will run after you. As for how you are going to go through Shiji’s city defense, forgive Xiao Nuzi [little/lowly woman] for not being of any help.”

Kou Zhong said, “Where is she?”

Shen Luoyan recovered her usual calm; she said nonchalantly, “Hand the roster over first and then you can have her. Humph! Don’t you forget that even if the roster is destroyed by you, we can always spend a little bit of effort to recreate it.”

Kou Zhong slyly said, “Since you are not afraid of losing all accounts of previous transaction, and you are not afraid of losing the opportunity, I might as well destroy the roster first before staking everything in life and death fight against

you. Xiao Ling is dead anyway, there is no point in me and Susu to keep on living!”

This was precisely the most crucial point in the plan that Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong cooked up. They wanted Shen Luoyan to believe that since Xu Ziling was dead, Kou Zhong was starting to have suicidal thought, and thus giving pressure to Shen Luoyan. It would also lead the enemy into mistakenly assessing their strength.

The only thing they did not anticipate was Shen Luoyan’s reaction upon hearing the news ‘Xu Ziling was dead’.

Shen Luoyan did have the intention of mistreating Susu to force Kou Zhong to surrender, but hearing Kou Zhong’s last remark, she swallowed back whatever it was she was going to say. She only sigh and said, “Ay! So be it! But there are some things I find it difficult to make decisions.”

And then with her delicate voice she called out, “Get Susu out!”

Not too long afterwards, the ‘Old Man of the Field’ Mo Cheng, who had once captured Kou and Xu, two boys, on the river using brilliant scheme, came out escorting Susu and brought her to Shen Luoyan’s side.

Susu’s tears were already flowing freely as she cried out sorrowfully, “Is Xiao Ling really dead?”

Kou Zhong had mouth, but found it difficult to talk; he did not dare to signal her with his eyes either.

With desolate expression Shen Luoyan said, “One hand deliver the book, the other hand deliver the person. I guarantee my subordinates won’t pursue and attack you. Only one word ‘No’ from you, Susu’s corpse will lie horizontally on the ground, and we will go all out to kill you.”

Kou Zhong pretended to surrender. He lay the book down on the ground, but stretched his feet to step on it. “Release her!” he said.

Shen Luoyan nodded slightly. Mo Cheng grabbed Susu and tossed her high in the air, so that if he wanted to catch her, he would have to step back.

Kou Zhong was really obedient; he leaped backward to catch Susu, and then like a burst of wind they went away.

Mo Cheng picked the roster. With great difficulty he opened up the bind, and take a look. His countenance changed. "Miss, not good," he said, "That kid has the guts to swindle us."

Shen Luoyan took the book and looked. Other than the last two pages, the rest of the book was Old Master Kong's Analects of Confucius, which gods know where they stole it from. Her pretty face immediately turned deathly white from anger. Her eyes flashing with murderous intention, she said, "I want to see where can they run away?"

Immediately her jet-black eyebrows knitted as she softly said, "Could it be that he is not dead yet?"

Speaking to this point, she felt her pretty face was burning, she did not even know what she felt in her heart. Could it be that this little demon had somehow taken a place in her heart?

Xu Ziling hugged the laughing and crying Susu tight in his bosom; he said in great delight, "I did not expect Shen Poniang would really fall into our trick."

Kou Zhong sat down with his back against the wall. "Your stratagem was indeed formidable," he said, "First of all, you predicted that Shen Poniang was waiting for us to come back to rescue Su Jie. You even predicted that she would be willing to return Su Jie to us, to increase the difficulty of our escape effort. However, you still missed something."

Xu Ziling was puzzled, "What thing?" he asked.

Susu whispered, "She seemed to be very fond of you!"

Xu Ziling scoffed. "I don't care whether she is fond or not fond of me," he said, "That kind of woman, even if she is given to me as a present, I won't accept it."

Turning to Susu, he asked, "Did Shen Poniang treat Jiejie badly?"

Susu shook her head and said, "She lied to me by saying that she has caught Xiao Zhong, and she pressured me into telling her what had happened in the last few days, so Jiejie had to tell her."

Kou Zhong's countenance changed. "Jiejie did not mention anything about Daiqing Lou, did you?" he asked.

Susu sat up straight. "Of course not!" she snapped, "How could Jiejie not know the severity of this matter?"

Kou Zhong scooted over and wrapped his arm around Xu Ziling's shoulders. "You can be considered very lucky! Turns out that guy who injured you was the 'Shadow Assassin' Yang Xuyan, who even dared to assassinate our Ol' Die."

With hatred in his voice Xu Ziling said, "Were it not for I managed to promptly transfer my inner power to neutralize his inner power entering my body, an insignificant book would not save my life. Humph! If this time we can escape alive, I want to take a good look on him."

Kou Zhong patted his chest, "Those who dare to offend us, the Two Dragons of Yangzhou, will not have a good end. Take Shen Poniang for example, I guarantee that these coming days she won't be able to sleep peacefully."

Xu Ziling helped Susu up and said with a wry smile, "I am afraid for the next few days I won't be able to fight. Supposing Peipei cannot help us, we have no choice but to exchange the real roster with our freedom."

Kou Zhong accompanied him in heaving a sigh.

Suddenly they heard faint barking of dogs in the distance.

The three of them exchanged glances. They knew that if they did not slip away now, they could forget about leaving forever.

Book 5 Chapter 5 – Entanglement Of Passion And Evil

Xingyang City.

Heavy snow.

Daiqing Lou has not opened its door to welcome the guests. Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling and Susu, three people were hiding inside a small uninhabited two-story side-building by the front courtyard, waiting quietly for the clothing store delivery boy.

Peipei has become their only hope of escaping.

Now that Xu Ziling was seriously wounded, relying on Kou Zhong's strength alone, it would be impossible for him to bring the other two escaping from the city.

Losing the roster, Shen Luoyan would definitely do everything in her power to hunt them down, because this matter involved the rise and fall of the Wagang Army.

Kou Zhong leaned against the window and looked out; he said in low voice, "I am not lying to you, when Shen Luoyan, that b1tch, thought that you died, she was acting differently from her usual manner, and I know that she was not pretending."

Xu Ziling was sitting cross-legged to recuperate; hearing Kou Zhong, he opened

his eyes and said impatiently, "Stop talking! Whenever I remember her, my heart is burning."

Without turning his head, Kou Zhong warned him, "Don't be impatient; be careful, or else you might suffer fire deviation."

Xu Ziling was shocked. He realized that after sustaining serious injury, his strength was in decline, and his state of mind was prone to fluctuate. Hastily he focused his attention to recover his mental state to its original crystal clear condition.

Her pretty face blushing slightly, Susu said, "Shen Luoyan did ask about Jiejie's relationship with you two; when I told her, she did not seem to be convinced. Come to think about it, maybe she is really jealous!"

Kou Zhong's gaze returned to the floating snowflakes filling the heaven and the earth outside. He nodded and said, "Shen Poniang once said that if she married, she would marry Xiao Ling, but she wanted me to be her lover. At that time she was joking, but now I think there is 30% truth in what she said. Ha! If we can create distress in her mind, all enmity is paid in full!"

And then he excitedly said, "Hey! He's here!"

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' there was a knock on the door. The shop assistant holding a bundle of cloth in his hands shouted against the cold wind, "Satin brocade delivery!"

A big man came out of the main hall's door. He walked across the front courtyard, and pushed the main gate a little. "What is it?" he asked.

The shop assistant handed the bundle over to the big man's hands and muttered, "Naturally it is highest quality silk fabric; it's for Miss Peipei." Finished speaking, without even turning his head around he hurriedly trudged away, braving the snow.

The big man was stunned; he stared blankly for half a day before carrying the

bundle back into the building.

Kou Zhong quickly dropped down on the floor and stuck his ear to listen to the activity downstairs.

He heard a woman asked, “He Fu! What is it?”

He Fu replied, “Really strange! Someone’s sending highest quality silk fabric and specifically indicated that it is for Lady Boss!”

“That is strange indeed!” the woman said, “Lady Boss has not personally come out to greet the guests for a long time, unexpectedly someone is trying to curry favor with her. Just deliver it to her place, we’ll talk about it later when she comes back!”

Noiselessly Kou Zhong flashed out of the side-room. A moment later he came back and said, “Turns out Peipei is the lady boss of this place. She lives in a secluded room at the rear courtyard, but right now I don’t know where she went.”

“This is not a good place to hide,” Xu Ziling said, “We’d better go to hide in her private chamber!”

Kou Zhong cheered, praising his good thinking. Carrying Susu, he left first to lead the way. Xu Ziling had no difficulty running after him.

If Yang Xuyan were to personally witness the current situation, he would be shocked and would not dare to believe his eyes.

Because he did not know that the ‘Secret to Long Life’ was Taoist School’s secret, which was not passed on throughout the ages. It was also the secret that controlled nature; that gods and ghosts could not comprehend.

When Yang Xuyan’s sword pierced Xu Ziling’s lower abdomen, it was blocked by the roster, so that the speed was somewhat reduced. However, this split second buffer was enough for Xu Ziling to prevent the sharp tip from delivering

fatal qi into his body.

Lower abdomen was like the sea of qi, if this part were wounded, it would be very difficult to recover. To martial art practitioners who cultivate qi, it would be especially devastating.

Yet the 'Secret to Long Life's' function was precisely to save one's life and to prolong it. On top of that, there was Kou Zhong's true qi, which came from the same source, giving aid to him in treating the injury. Therefore, within a period of one night, Xu Ziling was able to recover most of his strength, creating a miracle, which other people found it hard to believe. Meanwhile, Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling and Susu naturally thought that it was as it should be; they were not surprised at all.

It was Shen Luoyan who has miscalculated; she had the search concentrated in the dense lanes, alleys and houses within two li radius from her residence, resulting the three people could easily come and hide in this place.

By this time the girls of Daiqing Lou have not gotten out of bed for too long, everybody was taking a bath and changing their clothes, and have not left their rooms, hence there were only a few maids and servant walking along the corridor, so that the three people could arrive at the Lady Boss Peipei's building without any surprise, without any danger. Avoiding two young maids at the anteroom, they slipped into her personal chamber.

Without any politeness Kou Zhong pulled open the bedspread and asked shivering Susu to get into the quilt first, and then he had Xu Ziling lying down on the other side, while he himself sat at the foot of the bed.

He laughed and said, "Looks like there is nothing special about the Wagang Army, at least up to this time they still cannot do anything to us."

Susu angrily said, "The worst thing about Xiao Zhong is that you are very easy to be complacent. Wait until we can escape out of town, feeling proud about yourself at that time won't be too late!"

Xu Ziling said, "Since leaving Yangzhou, night and day we lived a fugitive life. I

really wish we could find a place with verdant hills and limpid water where we can settle down, living a quiet and peaceful life.”

Susu excitedly went into detailed discussion on what kind of place would be ideal for them to settle down.

Soon afterwards Kou Zhong asked about Yang Xuyan’s martial art skill. After Xu Ziling told him everything he knew, as if he was still terrified he said, “This person’s internal energy has reached the ‘following-one’s-heart-desires’ level; not only the tip of his sword could spit out qi power, it was even divided further into hundreds and thousands streams, each one with different level of pulling force, so that I was completely unable to display my usual level.”

Kou Zhong muttered to himself, “This is very unusual for sure, but since he could achieve it, we ought to be able to do the same.”

“Xiao Ling,” Susu was curious, “You really could not see his appearance clearly?”

“That’s what more surprising,” Xu Ziling replied, “The place we fought was dark without any light, but clearly my vision was filled with sword rays, plus his movement was as fast as a ghost or a demon; I could not even tell whether he is tall or short, fat or thin.”

Kou Zhong slapped his thigh, “I understand,” he said, “Try pressing your eyeball with your finger; very quickly you will see stars. Yang Xuyan must be exploiting this principle; he used the sword qi to create pressure to your eyes, so that your misperception flared out. Ay! This guy can be considered really formidable!”

Xu Ziling nodded, “Perhaps it did happen like you said,” he said, “But his sword was even more terrifying. Obviously strike would hit the target, but suddenly it hit empty air, and the real strike came, it was so slick that I could not block it. No wonder there are so many dominating characters harboring a grudge under his sword.”

Kou Zhong breathed out a mouthful of cold air; he said, “This guy is really

proficient. Huh?”

The three of them shut up immediately.

Sound of footsteps coming from afar, even Susu was able to hear it. Followed by the two maids in the outer hall spoke in chorus, “Madame is back!”

Inside the room, the three people were greatly delighted; knowing that finally they were going to find Peipei.

A somewhat cold and detach, deep, but pleasant to hear female voice spoke, “What is this?”

One of the maids replied, “Somebody bought a bolt of silk fabric from the west street shop and have it delivered here, indicating clearly that it was for Madame. This matter has been reported to Yun Niang.”

Peipei was silent for half a day before finally spoke calmly, “Go get Yun Niang for me.”

The two maids complied and left.

Straining his ears to eavesdrop, Kou Zhong heard Peipei sat down; he whispered, “Let’s hear what they have to say first.”

Xu Ziling said, “Isn’t Yun Niang the flirtatious lady who received us the other day?”

Kou Zhong nodded.

Suddenly the three people felt somewhat nervous.

Right now it could be said that Peipei was their last hope.

If this road is blocked, then they could only rely on their own power to escape.

Previously, when Xu Ziling was not injured, it was already hard to accomplished; right not it was even more difficult to do.

Soon Yun Niang arrived. After dismissing the two maids, Peipei said, "What did you find?"

Yun Niang respectfully replied, "I have investigated this matter. The one buying the cloth must be Susu, the time was yesterday afternoon. It appears that the two boys are using the 'toss a stone to find out what's ahead' trick trying to find Madame."

The three people listening inside the room shuddered in fear, because when speaking about them, Yun Niang's voice did not have any trace of politeness.

Peipei was silent for half a day; she said, "It should be so. But I am afraid they won't be able to come. Right now Xu Ziling is injured by Yang Xuyan, whether he will live or die is still to be seen. Shen Luoyan is going all-out to search for them. Just now she passed on a message to me, telling me that if our Baling Bang dared to interfere, she would not be polite. Therefore, we simply must not stain our hands."

When Kou Zhong and the others, three people, heard this, they looked at each other, their hearts sank.

Outside, Yun Niang griped, "This time we are going to be killed by Xiang Shaoye! Offending Wagang Army, how can we set out foot in Xingyang?"

Peipei said, "The only way is to cooperate nicely with Shen Luoyan. Just now I went out by myself to see whether Kou Zhong would show himself to meet with me. And now we have confirmation that he has not come, I will notify Shen Luoyan about this matter. If they did come, you have to try to detain them here; wait for my return and then we'll talk."

Finished speaking, she went out of the room.

Now that the three people's last hope was dashed, after putting everything in the room to its original condition, they quietly left.

Using the heavy snow as a cover, with Kou Zhong carrying Susu on his back, they swiftly traversed several buildings, and reached the large garden of Xu Shiji's official residence.

After surveying the surroundings for a moment, Kou Zhong said, "According to Chen Laomou's instruction, Xu Shiji's office must be in one of the side rooms east and west of the main building. And Xingyang's city blueprint ought to be there as well."

Xu Ziling said, "That will be easy to find out. Let's go!"

The three crossed the garden and headed toward the front courtyard.

By this time Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's experience was already very rich; they knew when to come and when to leave, hence they stopped and proceeded accordingly. After avoiding several servants and maids of the mansion, they arrived at Xu Shiji's study, a room filled with scroll after scroll of documents.

Following Chen Laomou's method, they searched around speedily, thumbing through the documents, and returned them to their original conditions so that not a trace of sign would be found that they have been manipulated.

The number of documents in the room exceeded a thousand scrolls, therefore, this task was time consuming and laborious.

The entire Xu mansion appeared to be deserted, it wasn't clear whether all the martial art experts in the mansion were involved in the operation to hunt and arrest them.

The two boys focused their strength into their eyes, flipping over the left and uncovered the right in the dark, all the way until the first watch of the night [between 7-9pm] before finally Kou Zhong made a breakthrough.

The three huddled together, looking at a roll of drawings Kou Zhong spread over the table. Susu lighted an oil lamp on the table. Kou Zhong took off his outer garment to mask the lantern, so that the light would not leak out.

Xu Ziling turned to the third page from the bottom and called out happily, "This is it."

It was the map of Xingyang City's underground sewer system, the drawing was very detailed, and it was well-annotated.

Kou Zhong pointed to a sewer at the south of the city and said, "This sewer is connected to the moat, the width reaches five chi [reminder: 1 chi is approx. 1 foot or 1/3m] enough for us to pass through."

Xu Ziling pointed to the intersection between the sewer and the city wall river and said, "There must be a drainage fence or some kind of barrier installed here at the mouth of the sewer; we must bring a saw or some other tool to break out."

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "That's easy, just leave it to me. Right now let me find the way first, you two hide in here, wait for me to come back."

The three studied the map a bit longer. Susu dejectedly said, "I am not leaving! Such a long underwater passage, I will be suffocating to death."

Kou Zhong giggled and said, "There is Xiao Zhong here, how can Jiejie have any problem? Last time Xiao Ling sucked Jiejie's mouth, this time it's my turn!"

Susu glowered at Kou Zhong, her pretty face turned red.

Xu Ziling admonished him, "Zhong Shao, how can you speak such frivolous words to Su Jie? Our sister-brother relation is clear and white; that time it was an emergency!"

Kou Zhong busily apologized to Susu. Sweeping his eyes around, he said,

“You’d better hide inside that big wardrobe. I only need to take some of the contents out, it should have enough space for you to hide. Xiao Ling, use this opportunity to recuperate, Su Jie, try to get some sleep.”

By the time Xu Ziling awoke, Susu was still sleeping soundly in his bosom; her breathing was soft and even. He busily woke Susu up and whispered, “Someone’s coming!”

Susu woke up with a start and turned around to bury her face into his bosom; she did not even dare to take even a half of loud breathing.

The door was opened, Shen Luoyan’s voice was heard outside the wardrobe, “Shiji! Where is the city map?”

After a series of light rustling noise, there was a sound of a scroll being opened. Xu Shiji’s voice said, “We have searched the entire southern part of the city, still we can’t find those two kids. We must expand the scope, while at the same time sealed off the places we have searched, so that they cannot slip back in.”

Xu Ziling groaned inwardly.

Relying on his fantastic true qi, it shouldn’t be difficult to evade these two people’s eyes and ears. But Susu only knew punching and kicking skill; she did not know any first-class internal skill at all. When Shen and Xu, two people have calmed down, they would definitely be able to tell that there was something unusual inside the wardrobe.

Thinking to this point, he had a sudden inspiration; quickly he covered Susu’s lips and slowly transferred his true qi into her mouth. As expected, Susu’s external breathing stopped. A pure, based on internal-breathing qi flowed in and out; from external breathing turned into internal breathing.

Shen Luoyan and Xu Shiji discussed step-by-step method to search the entire city. While they were deciding on how to seal off the area, Shen Luoyan suddenly let out a tender cry; and then there was a sound of people kissing on the outside.

Shen Luoyan furiously said, “Don’t do that! I am not in the mood.”

Xu Shiji let out a cold snort and said, “Not in the mood? When did you ever be in the mood? How long has it been since we had some kind of intimacy?”

Displeased, Shen Louyan backed off, “When Miss is not in the mood, that means the Miss is not in the mood. Could it be that Xu Ye is having some regret?”

Xu Shiji’s tone softened somewhat. In an almost pleading tone he said, “Luoyan! You should know I am wholeheartedly devoted to you, don’t let any outsider affect our deep affection to each other!”

Inside the wardrobe, Susu snaked her hand around to lightly pinch Xu Ziling’s lower back, indicating that the ‘outsider’ who affected their relationship ought to be him.

Shen Luoyan’s voice turned icy-cold, “Don’t talk nonsense,” she said, “What outsider, insider? How can it involve any third person? You, Xu Ye, have always been very romantic, whether you have me, one person, or not, what does it have to do with you? You can be wholeheartedly devoted to me, I am afraid that was only a joke!”

From slightly ashamed, Xu Shiji flew into rage, “Originally I did not want to say this, I have been playing along according to the situation [orig. find a stage, put on a comedy], and you know it. Why do you settle the score only now?”

After a short pause, he continued, “Ever since you came across that guy Ba Fenghan, his sweet speech and honeyed words swept you off your feet, so that you roamed around together with him all day long. Upon returning, you suddenly changed. Even Duke Mi asked me about you. Tell me, what should I tell Duke Mi?”

This time it was Xu Ziling’s turn inside the wardrobe to feel awkward, but he was also greatly disgusted. Turned out Shen Luoyan came across Ba Fenghan, and perhaps they even went to bed together, otherwise Xu Shiji would not be that jealous.

On the other hand, Susu was greatly surprised, because when she thought that Xu Ziling was killed, her demeanor changed, how could now suddenly Ba Fenghan come into the picture?

She heard Shen Luoyan furiously said, "Your affair, I do not give a damn; my affair, I don't need you to care."

Xu Shiji softened up; he sighed and said, "Not only Ba Fenghan is a foreigner, this time he came to the Central Plains, it is clearly to stir up the wind and the rain. Ever since he made a name in that sword duel, he has already defeated more than a dozen renowned masters in various regions. Pulling up a relationship with someone like him won't give us the slightest bit of advantage."

Shen Luoyan was silent for half a day; suddenly she said, "Right now I am only thinking of how to get the roster back; if we let it falls into the government's hands, the repercussion is simply unthinkable! Let's go quickly."

Only after the two people left that Xu Ziling and Susu finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Susu's raised her pretty face, with her breathing as fragrant as the orchid she said, "Xu Shiji's fear is misplaced!"

Xu Ziling let out a wry smile and said, "It's because Jiejie has not seen Ba Fenghan that you said so. Not only this man has superior martial art skill, his appearance exudes a very breathtaking charm. All he has to do was to make an appearance, and automatically everybody's eyes were drawn to him. Compared to him, I am really far too inferior."

Susu was displeased, "I don't believe you," she said, "It's just because you and Xiao Zhong are still young. But in time, Jiejie don't believe there are people who will overshadow your radiance. You just don't know it yet! In fact, every day you are still changing. Most of all, each one of you has your unique personality traits, even Jiejie's heart is being moved by you!"

Although the two of them were in such a close, intimate situation, there was

no amorous thought in their hearts, only pure love between sister and brother.

Embarrassed, Xu Ziling said, "Jiejie must not laugh at me, how about getting some more sleep?"

Susu yielded; she nodded, and then like a docile little lamb she obediently buried herself in his bosom and closed her beautiful eyes, and fell asleep.

With Susu's alluring tender body in his embrace, myriads of thoughts were surging in Xu Ziling's mind. All of a sudden he was overwhelmed with the feeling that he was completely at a loss.

The first thing he had to consider was not how to deal with Yuwen Huaji to avenge Fu Junchuo, but rather how to arrange a place for the good Jiejie in his bosom to settle down.

The problem was that all along the two boys were unclear on the relationship between Li Jing and Susu.

Even if they found Li Jing, they might only make things worse.

It was the time when the soldiers mutinied and the troops rebelled, they would not feel at ease leaving Susu just anywhere.

On the other hand, taking her along would also be extremely dangerous to her, considering the two boys have become the target of a multitude of arrows.

While he was racking his brains until his head felt bloated, Kou Zhong came back.

By this moment the sky has brightened. Kou Zhong slipped into the wardrobe and dejectedly said, "This time we are doomed; turns out when the sewer reaches the exit, it is divided into a dozen passages so small that even a dog cannot pass through. We are wasting our effort, and have been rejoicing in vain."

“Did you go down to check it?” Susu asked.

Kou Zhong nodded, “Of course I did,” he said, “I had just stolen another set of clothes to change. Ay!”

“No wonder you smell different!” Xu Ziling remarked.

Kou Zhong said, “While I was out, I also checked the situation of the city defense. There are Wagang Army troops everywhere, the city does not lack elevated lookout posts; leaving the city is merely lunatic ravings. Hey! Xiao Ling, are you better now?”

“Three more days before I am fully recovered,” Xu Ziling replied. And then he said, “I have an idea.”

“You are really smart,” Kou Zhong said in amazement, “I have already exhausted my brains. Speak up quickly, let us hear it.”

“It’s that roster,” Xu Ziling replied, “For Wagang Army, this roster is a lot more important than some ‘Duke Yang Treasure Trove’. We can use it as our bargaining chip. What do you say?”

Kou Zhong pondered silently for half a day; finally he nodded his agreement and said, “Certainly it’s the only way out in the middle of no way out. However, it would be best if we wait till you are fully recovered before going out to strike a deal with Shen Poniang, that way we will have a bit more assurance.”

Xu Ziling shrugged his shoulders, “We are not going to fight,” he said, “A bit sooner or a bit later won’t make much difference. But according to the news we just heard, this morning Shen Luoyan may begin searching this area. If we strike the deal after we are found out, it won’t have as much value.”

“All right!” Kou Zhong said, “I’ll go find Shen Poniang then!”

Susu pulled him back, “Xiao Zhong!” she called, “Jiejie is very scared!”

Kou Zhong planted a light kiss on her cheek; he said with a giggle, “Jiejie, set your heart at ease! Whoever wants to deal with us, Yangzhou’s Two Dragons, must bag the food they can’t finish and take it away [Not sure about this, must be some idiom].”

And then it was Xu Ziling’s turn to pull him back, and without missing a word, he told him everything he heard from Shen Luoyan and Xu Shiji’s discussion about the hunt and arrest operation.

“Thank Heaven and thank the Earth!” Kou Zhong happily said, “This time they can forget of standing by my side at all!”

It was only then did he really leave.

Book 5 Chapter 6 – Vying For The Book

Snowy evening. Like a bolt of lightning Kou Zhong flitted passed several buildings, and in short time he already ascertained that Shen Luoyan was not at home.

Although just like other people, with all her power and influence Shen Luoyan also wanted to hunt and arrest them, Kou Zhong had always felt that this pretty Junshi [military counselor] had some kind of subtle connection with them, that she was one with whom he could talk to.

To Shen Luoyan, this book represented the entire strength distribution and intelligence network of the Wagang Army, its importance was indeed incomparable. Moreover, the book was lost while in her possession, naturally she would be held responsible. Therefore, in this business deal, he had no worries that she would not yield.

Question is: how to contact her?

Shen Luoyan's private chamber was pitch-black, the inner courtyard of her mansion was also devoid of any guard reinforcements.

Although Kou Zhong felt as if he was entering a no-man's land, his heart was actually full of disappointment and sense of loss.

After waiting painstakingly for a long time, he still did not see Shen Luoyan came back. Without any other choice, he was thinking of returning to Xu Ziling to discuss this matter further.

As he leaped over a high wall and landed on the roof of another house nearby, an alarm suddenly went off in his heart.

Kou Zhong was very astute; quickly he changed direction and traversed sideways. Who would have thought that his left ankle suddenly tightened? Something like a rope wound itself tightly around his ankle.

Kou Zhong was shocked. He wanted to use the fastest and quickest way to pull the broadsword from his back, but then suddenly remembered that he had thrown his broadsword away in his effort to save Xu Ziling. While his hand was grabbing an empty air, he was pulled back that he rolled over the roof tile and fell. A thin stream of finger wind attacked him, threatening the vital acupoint on his back.

In this critical situation, Kou Zhong remained calm; exerting his true qi, he sent out both palms backward to strike the enemy.

The opponent did not expect Kou Zhong to be this outstanding; he swiftly retreated to the end of the narrow alley to evade the wind from Kou Zhong's palms.

'Bang!' Kou Zhong's back landed on the ground. He was going to spring back up when a stream of strange energy flowed out from the rope binding his foot and penetrated his body, and in an instant permeated the meridians in his entire body.

Kou Zhong's sturdy body was severely shaken, immediately his hands and feet went numb, and he fell back to the ground.

A shadow flitted over; the shadow's right foot gingerly stepped on the right side of the small of Kou Zhong's back.

Kou Zhong immediately felt severe pain that his waist felt like it was about to burst; but the true qi in his body quickly reacted, from his tianling [at the top of one's head] acupoint it burst forth downward; not only it neutralized the numbness of his limbs, it also blocked the stream of energy from the tip of the opponent's foot entering his lower back.

Kou Zhong was about to strike back when that person bent down and reached out to brush the pit of Kou Zhong's stomach.

It was only then did Kou Zhong see that the opponent was wearing night-walker outfit, complete with head covering, revealing only his eyes and mouth and nose.

Kou Zhong inwardly called, 'Come closer!' Unleashing the 'Meridian Severing Technique' taught by Tu Shufang, his fingertips brushed over the opponent's wrist first, and then using the qinna technique he grabbed him.

That person obviously did not expect Kou Zhong still had the ability to fight back; his body went weak and he fell into Kou Zhong's embrace.

Kou Zhong did not dare to hesitate; taking advantage while that person was still unable to defuse the stream of qi from Kou Zhong's fingertips that was blocking his channels, he rolled over and pressed the opponent against the ground.

Unexpectedly that person let out a tender grunt as his four limbs were entangled by Kou Zhong that he was unable to move a single step.

Kou Zhong was very proud of himself, thinking that this 'he' was unexpectedly a 'she', as he groped around and discovered that she was very well developed. After retracting his right hand that locked the vital acupoint on her backbone, he peeled off her head covering.

'Ah!' immediately both people cried out at the same time.

Like a cloud her beautiful black hair cascaded down on the snow-covered ground of the small alley. Under the dim light reflected by the snow, her eyes twinkled in the dark like a pair of precious stones. To his surprise, she was none other than Song Yuzhi, whose beauty was brimming with masculine air.

Kou Zhong was stunned. "So it's you!" he said.

Not only Song Yuzhi was not shy at all, she spoke in cold manner, “Let us make a business deal!”

Kou Zhong was tempted to take a little bit of advantage on her; for instance, kissing her fragrant lips or something like that, to see whether she would remain this aloof. However, he was intimidated by her cool-headedness, and in turn did not dare to offend her. Giggling, he said, “If you want to use your body to make a deal, you can spare the haggling, because I, Kou Ye [master], will not be coerced by female charm trick. Ha! Turns out the thing wrapping around your Shaoye’s big foot was the beauty’s flexible whip. Very formidable. Do you usually keep it wrapped around your tiny waist?”

Recalling that she was the Clan Leader of the Song Clan ‘Heavenly Saber’ Song Que’s daughter, whose status and honor incomparable, yet he had given her body an ‘all-around’ groping, he could not restrain a burst of excitement from rising up.

Song Yuzhi’s black eyebrows frowned slightly; she sighed and said, “Don’t be too complacent! Your skill is still not enough to defeat me, it’s just that I underestimated the enemy, and was unable to gauge your foundation, hence I committed a blunder, that’s all! If you speak frivolously again, or do more improper things to me, unless you kill me afterwards, I will make sure that you will face endless disaster.”

Kou Zhong asked in surprise, “You are encouraging me to continue pressing your alluring body? To a lady of a large, influential family with high status like you, the fact that a guy from a poor and humble family that is not even worth mentioning has taken advantage of you, should give you enough reason to commit suicide!”

Song Yuzhi nonchalantly replied, “Since you already pressed me down, so what if you want to press me down half a day longer? All right! Are you ready to talk business?”

Kou Zhong reached out to press her Jianjing [lit. shoulder well] acupoint; he smiled and said, “Beauty really know how to put an act. Turns out very soon you’ll unseal the locked acupoints, therefore, you deliberately talked to me like

that to swindle me. Hee ... hee ... I am off!"

Song Yuzhi's eyes gleamed; she softly said, "Don't go. If you go, who'll shelter me from the rain and the snow?"

For the first time Kou Zhong felt that this beauty with unique charm was unfathomable. Although he appeared to gain the upper hand, the initiative actually lay in the opponent's hands.

Song Yuzhi continued, "You ought to know that I did not mean to hurt you. Based on this fact, can we make a deal now? Aren't you looking for Shen Luoyan to make a deal?"

Kou Zhong forced a smile and said, "You have seen through me; just consider me afraid you! Is Song Shidao your esteemed older brother? You must be aware that he and I have friendship relation, hence the reason I did not really dare to touch you."

Song Yuzhi indifferently replied, "You are people whom 'the streets know the alleys heard about', no one is unaware of your matter. Were it not for as early as three months ago I learned about your ability from my Dage [eldest brother], but underestimated your progress, tonight I would not have underestimated the enemy and suffered your frivolous treatment. But my intuition was correct, you are not a despicable man. Ao! How could you ..."

Kou Zhong rolled away and sat up; he awkwardly said, "It was a natural reaction of a normal man. Miss Song, please forgive me."

Song Yuzhi immediately burst her acupoints open. Raising her tender body, she said with slight anger, "Seeing you were unintentional, I let you off this time! But you must forget this matter; if I find out that you ever mention this to anybody, I will definitely take your little life." Finished speaking, she bent down to untie the whip rope on his ankle.

Looking at her loose beautiful hair, Kou Zhong felt a bit unsure about their relationship; he sounded her out by asking, "Just now you were attacking me viciously, why suddenly become this considerate and kind to me?"

Song Yuzhi wrapped the entire five zhang of flexible whip around her waist; she said coldly, “Who’s considerate and kind to you? I never said that I wouldn’t fight with you. It’s just that seeing your natural character is simple and good, I am a bit more polite to you. That’s all!”

After staring blankly for half a day, Kou Zhong scratched his head and said, “I really don’t understand you.”

Song Yuzhi moved her tender body slightly farther away from him; with her beautiful eyes, which pupils looked very black against the white eyeballs, she stared at him and said calmly, “Who needs to be understood by you? Just listen carefully: under the current situation, sooner or later you will be caught by Wagang Army. Don’t think that I simply said frightening words to scare you, Shen Luoyan already sent express report to Li Mi, asking him to dispatch Zheng Zong back to participate in this hunt and arrest operation. This man’s nickname is ‘Flying Feather’, an expert in tracking and pursuing people; he raises birds with the sole purpose of tracking people. As soon as he is here, you won’t have a place to hide.”

Kou Zhong was greatly surprised; while at the same time realized the reason Shen Luoyan dared to make a bet that she would be able to catch them three times at the mouth of the river was because this man was working for her in secret.

He giggled and said, “Don’t stare at me like that! Look, we met in such a strange situation. This is a narrow alley, and it is snowing heavily, plus it is hard to say whether we are friend or foe, yet you want to make a deal? Ha! Very funny!”

Song Yuzhi showed a thoughtful look, but then she looked annoyed as she said, “Are you saying that I am lying to you to scare you?”

Kou Zhong leaned forward slightly; his tiger-eyes shot a scary gleam as he looked deep into her eyes and said, “Until now you are still looking down on me. Humph! We two brothers have never needed anybody to pity us. You want Shen Luoyan’s roster? If you have the ability, come to steal or to rob it from us! I, Kou Zhong, have no interest in making any deal with anybody.”

Finished speaking, he straightened up and stood tall, brushed away the snow from his body, smiled slightly, and turned away to leave.

Song Yuzhi also suddenly stood up and said coldly, "Don't go!"

Kou Zhong looked at the especially long whip around her waist, he humphed and said, "I know your magic weapon already, if you want to try it again, it won't be effective!"

Song Yuzhi loftily said, "You think what kind of people are our Song Family? Since I failed to capture you, would I shamelessly try for the second time? If you don't want to leave this city, then get lost as far as you can, and don't let me come across you again, because by that time, it would be too late to regret."

Kou Zhong was not the least bit angry; still giggling, he said, "Beauty, please calm down. Since you already have this kind of good intention, as long as you do not cover my book, or that Duke Yang Treasure that your Shaoye does not even know where, everything else can be discussed nicely."

Song Yuzhi crossly said, "What do you think you are? Do you think for no reason I am going to offend Wagang Army just to help you? Besides, very soon you can't even guarantee your little lives, yet you are still holding on to the book that has no usefulness to you whatsoever."

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and floated away.

Song Yuzhi stomped her feet in anger, but she was totally at a loss on how to deal with him.

In Xu Shiji's study room, Susu and Xu Ziling listened to Kou Zhong narrated his encounter with Song Yuzhi. The former anxiously said, "How are we going to deal with it? Speaking about tracking and pursuing skill, within the Wagang Army the 'Flying Feather' Zheng Zong undoubtedly occupies the first spot. Even if we manage to escape from the city, sooner or later he will overtake us."

Xu Ziling shrugged his shoulders and said, "We have already encountered him. His most formidable weapon is that magic bird. We are not afraid of him."

"Don't be complacent like that, all right?" Susu reproached him.

Kou Zhong was deep in thought for half a day. Suddenly he laughed and said, "It would be best if we swagger out, then look at Shen Luoyan's face!"

Xu Ziling shook his head, "That will diminish Shen Luoyan's standing too much. Furthermore, her worst fear is that the content would leak out; she would rather destroy it."

With head hanging down, Susu said, "If you don't have Jiejie as your burden, right now you won't have such a headache."

The two boys promptly spoke comforting words to her.

Xu Ziling scratched his head and said, "With a thousand ways, a hundred plans we are trying to find a way, but most are unrealistic. Why don't we try just charging our way out of the city? As long as one of us can get out, we can haggle over the price with Shen Luoyan."

Hearing this, Kou Zhong's heart was greatly moved. "How's your lower abdomen injury?" he asked.

Xu Ziling lowered his voice, "If I tell you, you won't believe it, but I feel even better than before."

Kou Zhong was greatly excited, "Now that's different," he said, "We might as well go all out, turn the city of Xingyang upside down. Do you still remember those dozen or so jars of kerosene in Shen Luoyan's house?"

Xu Ziling's eyes immediately lit up.

The stable in Xu Shiji's official residence was the first to catch fire. More than

forty horses stampeded out of the opened-wide back door and bolted wildly off into the street.

Next several spots of fire appeared in the main building. The melting ice and snow actually intensified the fire.

Most of manpower in the mansion had been deployed to join the search operation for the three people; in the confusion that ensued the maids and servants fled for their lives. The fire spread out rapidly, fortunately because of the high walls all around the premise, plus due to the heavy snow, it did not spread to neighboring buildings.

By the time the people involved in hunt and arrest operation rushed over in panic, on the other side of town Shen Luoyan's manor burst into flames, making the Wagang Army tired of constantly running for their lives.

This moment Shen Luoyan's beautiful body was standing on the roof of a building. Standing next to her, other than the 'Old Man of the Field' Mo Cheng, there was also a team of handpicked martial art experts from the Wagang Army.

Like the heavy snow falling into the earth, intelligence reports unceasingly brought up by the troops to her, but Shen Luoyan simply fixed her cold gaze on the two fires rising in the distance, but the fire was apparently under control.

Mo Cheng took a step forward behind Shen Luoyan, he respectfully said, "It appears that this is all those two guys' doing. I really don't understand why after being stabbed by Yang Xuyan, not only Xu Ziling did not die, he is even able to raise such a big wind and a big rain?"

A faint bitter smile escaped from the corner of Shen Luoyan's mouth; she said nonchalantly, "I did not underestimate them at all, but I still miscalculated. Now that I calmly think about it, I ought to know that since they are continuously making progress, not only their martial art skill are getting stronger with each passing day, their ability and wisdom should also grow along with their experience, so that they become very difficult to deal with."

Mo Cheng snorted and said, "It doesn't matter what they have become,

tonight they are going to lose their lives. Zheng Zong has just arrived here, now he is with Xu Ye [master Xu] setting up the net to intercept them; guaranteed that they won't be able to escape for too long."

Shen Luoyan coldly snapped, "Uncle Cheng! You are angry."

Mo Cheng was stunned.

Shen Luoyan calmly said, "The number of people who want to seek the Duke Yang Treasure Trove from them is too many to be counted. But the fact is that until today, nobody is able to do anything to deal with them. If we still underestimate the enemy like before, we might fail and might be wiped over the floor. The missing roster is of grave importance, if they really take it with them, I would have no choice but to atone for my crime with death."

This moment someone was coming to report that they have stopped the herd of horses running away from the Xu Mansion, but they failed to see the three people's vestige.

Mo Cheng sighed and said, "Xingyang City is so big, they only need to find a place to hide, we will have to waste so much effort to find them."

Shen Luoyan shook her head, "No!" she said, "I understand their character very well, especially that guy Kou Zhong; he is not that patient. Tonight they will go all-out in creating disturbance to take advantage of the situation to escape."

After a short pause, she continued, "What surprised me most is why did they seem to know about our hunt and arrest operation so that they come and go freely in the city? It is as if they personally listen to Xu Shiji and me planning it."

Right this moment, Xu Ziling's voice was heard from behind them, "Shen Luoyan! Do you have time to chat with us?"

Shen Luoyan and her men's countenance changed immediately; they turned around to look.

Under the heavy snow swirling in the air, Xu Ziling stood upright and unafraid on the roof ridge of a nearby house, he was speaking calmly, composed, elegant and stylish.

An indescribable feeling welled up in Shen Luoyan's heart. She felt it deep in her heart that Xu Ziling had grown up, not at all like the naughty, big kid, who still loved to play, impression she previously had. And she was not referring to his tall and straight figure, the most significant change was that the repeated crises and hardships have nurtured in him his current bearing and gallantry, which made up the distinctive style of Xu Ziling's intimidating charm.

Without waiting for her to respond, her men had already flown over and surrounded Xu Ziling, in a 'swords-drawn, bows-bent' like situation.

Shen Luoyan gathered her thought and flew over; in the blink of an eye she already stood face to face with Xu Ziling on the roof ridge.

The two people's eyes were locked toward each other; both were having a hundred and one thoughts swirling in their minds.

Xu Ziling nodded slightly, he calmly said, "From laughing, giggling and playing together, we have turned into archenemies who are fighting life and death battle against each other. Each time I am thinking about this I really feel downhearted."

The affection in Shen Luoyan's heart was even harder to describe.

Right now Xu Ziling's face still showed paleness due to the loss of blood, but it did not compromise his scholarly, refined appearance; on the contrary, it added some kind of profound depth and a sense of maturity to his demeanor that only sufferings could bring.

In all her life, a few men did indeed move her heart, but because helping Li Mi to gain the world has become her objective, love and family affairs have to be shoved to the side. So much so that she tried to make herself cold-hearted, that she would consider anything from the point of view whether this matter would be useful to their cause or not.

After encountering Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, every time she had to deal with these two boys, she had to go through a struggle in her heart. But at that time she only thought her heart was torn because she was fond of their talents.

However, she was acutely aware that she was actually happy to see them, that butting heads with them actually left a rich aftertaste in her mouth. Still, she never thought that there was any love between man and woman in her heart toward them.

When she found out that Xu Ziling was injured by Yang Xuyan, at the time where his life or death was still unknown, it suddenly dawned on her that 'Xu Ziling's death' may actually deal an unbearable blow to her.

It was as if she was losing the most precious thing in the world.

Now that she was standing face-to-face as enemies with this young martial art master, who was three or four years younger than she, the complicated contradiction in her heart was not hard to understand.

After taking a very deep breath, in the most calm voice she could muster Shen Luoyan said, "Are you at the end of your rope?"

Xu Ziling's eyes flashed with spirited rays; calmly he swept the enemies all around him with his gaze. As if nothing happened, he said, "Order them to stand back a little first, otherwise I will attack immediately."

With a cold laugh Shen Luoyan said, "Don't overly overestimate yourself, I can order them to withdraw, but it's not because I am afraid of your threat."

Xu Ziling said indifferently, "My threat includes a book, which you will never get back. But in case you don't believe me, this time I intentionally came to return the book to you, so that you won't bear the criminal charges. However, you are accustomed to repay kindness with evil; therefore, no matter what you think, I will not think it strange."

Shen Luoyan was silent for half a day; finally she waved her hand to order her

men to retreat, and then she sighed and said, “At a time where everybody, by hook or by crook, fighting over the world [tian xia], any gratitude and grudges is just a waste of time. How’s this: if you hand over the book, I will guarantee your safe passage out of the city.”

Xu Ziling shook his head, “How can that be enough?” he said, “I also want your personal guarantee that no matter what happen in the future, as long as it’s not us who stir it up, you must not come looking for us to give us trouble.”

Shen Luoyan dismissed him by saying, “The decision maker in the Wagang Army is Duke Mi and not me, Shen Luoyan. Even if I guarantee it, it will be useless.”

Xu Ziling helplessly shrugged his shoulders and said with a bitter laugh, “Do you want me to wait for Duke Mi’s return? Right here, right now, you are the decision maker, hence the reason we have no choice but to look for you. If later on Duke Mi overthrow your commitment, I certainly can’t blame you.”

Shen Luoyan’s tender heart shook; she suddenly came to realization why between Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, her favorable impression lay with Xu Ziling. It was simply because he always projected some kind of upright and true personality, unlike Kou Zhong who was frivolous and full of slick-cynicism.

She herself was a cunning, smart person who was used to handling any matter unscrupulously, yet she was obviously moved by Xu Ziling, someone with special quality that she lacked, someone that was totally different from her.

Xu Ziling was constantly on alert of any movement around him. Right now he caught a glimpse of the arrival of Xu Shiji and a group of competent-looking subordinate, who then stationed themselves on the roof ridge of a big residential building about a dozen zhang away to his left. But of course he was unclear whether the ‘Flying Feather’ Zheng Zong was among these men.

Shen Luoyan signaled Xu Shiji that everything was under control. She affectionately fixed her gaze on Xu Ziling for half a day before speaking softly, “Very well! I agree to this condition. Where is the book?”

Xu Ziling suppressed the ecstasy in his heart; lowering his voice, he said, “Withdraw your men from the eastern city gate immediately, open the east city gate, let Kou Zhong leave first, and then you alone accompany me going out of the city, I will return the book to you then.”

Shen Luoyan sighed and said, “Xiao Ling, you still don’t have enough experience. By saying that, it is obvious that the book is in your hands, because Kou Zhong must get Susu to a safe location as soon as possible ...”

“You are thinking of going back on your words?” Xu Ziling cut her off.

Shen Luoyan knew that Xu Ziling had seen through her attempt to sound him out; she smiled and said, “Of course not! Please take a good care of yourself, my little sweetheart.”

While Xu Ziling was baffled because she had called him her ‘little sweetheart’ for no reason, Shen Luoyan already flew away and landed by Xu Shiji’s side, and then they were whispering into each other’s ear.

It was only then did Xu Ziling discover that his entire body was drenched in cold sweats.

After going through numerous twists and turns, they were finally able to leave the city.

Book 5 Chapter 7 – Subduing Enemy On Snowy Ground

Side-by-side Xu Ziling and Shen Luoyan went out of the city. The former saw the marker Kou Zhong left at the city gate, so he knew that Kou Zhong and Susu already departed safely. His mood improved, he could not help the hostility in his heart toward Shen Luoyan decreasing a little.

The two of them silently unleashed their foot technique, very soon they left the city of Xingyang far behind in the vast and indistinct wind and snow.

When they reached the top of a hill, Xu Ziling stopped. He took out the book from his bosom, and without the slightest hesitation handed it over to her.

Shen Luoyan flipped through it, and after verifying that it was indeed her roster, she put it inside her pocket. Sighing softly, she said, “If my guess is correct, Xu Shiji will not let you off just because I gave you my promise. Therefore, unless you are fully confident that you are able to break away from Zheng Zong’s pursuit, you must by all means avoid meeting with Kou Zhong and Susu right away; otherwise it would be the moment the three of you lose your lives.”

Xu Ziling was greatly puzzled, “Why did you tell me that? Zhong Shao and I are already aware that your Wagang Army might go back on your word; but we did not expect that you would really be willing to let us go.”

Shen Luoyan’s pretty face blushed slightly; she said softly, “I owe you so much, I ought to brag a little bit that I am also a good person. However, even though you heard Zheng Zong’s name, you were not the least bit surprised. Evidently

you have someone who already disclosed this information to you; no wonder you already planned in advance.”

Xu Ziling was secretly terrified; this woman was extremely intelligent and crafty, the more they talked, the more she would deduce their actual situation.

While pondering how he could leave as soon as possible, Shen Luoyan looked deep into his eyes, and then lightly said, “I’m sure we’ll meet again someday!”

Xu Ziling mused, ‘Who wants to meet with you again someday?’ But without saying a word, he turned around and ran down the hill.

Just before entering the forest at the foot of the hill, he looked back, but Shen Luoyan already disappeared without any trace.

Xu Ziling turned around and ran back to the place where he parted ways with Shen Luoyan. Not too long afterwards he found the marker left by Kou Zhong, *i.e.* a small twig indicating the direction they were fleeing; there were also seven small pebbles, indicating he should go that way for more than seven li.

Xu Ziling messed up the marker, looked up to the heavens, and just as expected, he did not see Zheng Zong’s magical bird. This moment the snow was swirling heavily in the air; he had already guessed that it would be difficult for Zheng Zong to follow their trail on horseback.

Just as he was about to leave, he seemed to hear Shen Luoyan’s tender voice shouting from about half a li to the west. Without even thinking Xu Ziling went at full speed toward that direction.

Following the shout was a series of clashing qi noise like a muffled thunder. Xu Ziling unleashed the true qi in his body to its limit; he flew like a streak of shooting star splitting the snowstorm blanketing the big earth.

Since Yun Yuzhen taught them the ‘Bird Crossing Technique’, they had experienced countless setbacks, attempts, and hard work to get better. But because they had eventually succeeded in training the ‘Secret to Long Life’, in

turn their fantastic true qi could be applied in qinggong, so that each one of them was able to come up with amazing, beyond compare, shenfa. [Translator's note: this is rather hard to translate without wordy explanation, basically it is a pose or motion of the body specifically in martial art.]

Because of different interests and focus in developing their lightness skill, their qinggong style was also vastly different from each other. When they started training the 'Bird Crossing Technique', Kou Zhong loved to observe the marine ecosystem of swimming and cruising fish; therefore, automatically he developed movements mimicking the best of variety fish motion, full of vivacious postures. Still as a maiden, moving like a fugitive.

Xu Ziling, on the other hand, loved to observe the trajectory of all kinds of bird flying in the air; therefore, naturally the postures he adopted were full of soaring-bird and diving-falcon style. Like a heavenly steed soaring across the sky, difficult to trace its track.

Supporting them to attain their ideal body movement [shenfa, see above] was the true qi coming from diligent practice of the 'Secret to Long Life', which grew and multiplied without an end within their bodies.

Their pursuit of lightness skill style was actually matching their inner true qi. According to the five-element principle: fish is water and bird is fire. The true qi within Kou Zhong's body was cold; while Xu Ziling's was hot. Hence Kou Zhong imitating fish and Xu Ziling copying birds was a good fit like seamless heavenly clothes.

When they were injured by Zhai Rang, the two boys applied their inner power to heal each other, accidentally generating heat in the midst of cold, and cold in the midst of heat. Under the blending of Yin and Yang, it was no longer like before, where a lone Yang could not last and exhaustion was an endless recurring condition.

The most noticeable change was in the current utilization of the qinggong.

Hence the reason this moment as Xu Ziling unleashed his shenfa, he felt that his true qi circulated endlessly. The more he ran, the faster he was, until finally

even he himself was a bit scared.

The sound of fighting suddenly ceased. Xu Ziling was alarmed, thinking that based on Shen Luoyan's martial art skill, unless she was facing an opponent of Du Fuwei's caliber, she should not have any problem defending herself; why was that within more or less ten moves she seemed to be subdued by the enemy?

If that was the case, wouldn't it mean that the opponent was of his old dad's caliber? Could it be that the 'Shadow Assassin' Yang Xuyan has come?

Thinking about that, his heart shivered in fear. Instantly the true qi within his body from clear turned murky, from pure it became mixed; from flying in the air he suddenly dropped down to the ground. Hastily he took a sharp breath to dispel his apprehension toward Yang Xuyan.

Hastening the movement of inner breathing in his body, he focused his heart and mind, and immediately entered the 'moon in the well' realm. His five senses sensed the world around him, nothing could escape his detection.

Not only he was able to feel every single snowflake falling onto his body, he could even hear the sound of snowflakes touching each other within several zhang radius from him.

The heaven and the earth lit up; the wind, the snow, everything sounded very clear in his hearing.

This unprecedented amazing feeling only lasted for a blink of an eye; just as it happened suddenly, it also disappeared quite suddenly.

Shocked, Xu Ziling dropped down on his knees on the snowy plain, thoughts flashed in the speed of light in his mind. He gained a sudden enlightenment; he knew that his fear of Yang Xuyan has inadvertently stimulated the self-sufficient treasure-trove within his body; unexpectedly he rose to another level of new realm.

While he was scared and delighted at the same time, a sparkling object on the

snow caught his attention.

Xu Ziling gathered his thought. Springing up from the snowy ground, he walked over to pick up the object; to his amazement, it was Shen Luoyan's 'soul snatching hairpin'. He could not help but was shocked.

It appeared that Shen Luoyan was really in danger so that even her golden hairpin fell on the ground.

Xu Ziling hastened the circulation of his inner breathing; he drove away all shock and anxiety from his heart, and then launching his lightness skill, he searched along the vast snowy ground. A short while later, he did find some footprints that were already obscured by the falling snow.

These footprints, one after another, pointed to a dense forest in the southeast direction, each footprint was separated by almost eight zhang distance [80ft/25m], the evenness and accuracy of the footprints was quite shocking.

Just from the distance it was quite clear that this person's martial art skill was really high, almost to the 'unimaginable' level.

Xu Ziling asked himself: under normal circumstances, on solid ground, if he gave everything he had, perhaps he would be able to cover the same distance in one jump. But absolutely not on soft, snowy ground. It was not something that he could accomplish alone, much less if he had to carry someone else on his back.

However, it was not enough reason for him to give up rescuing Shen Luoyan. After taking a sharp intake of breath, he swiftly chased forward.

The snowstorm attacked him head-on, giving him the full taste of frigid wind and painful snow.

He could see the feeble light from Xingyang City painting the distant horizon on his left, amplifying the desolate feeling the snowstorm already given him.

Xu Ziling had just entered the fringe of the snowy forest when his acute hearing already caught some kind of strange noise.

It was the sound of a woman panting and moaning.

Xu Ziling immediately realized what was going on. A righteous anger welled up in his heart, yet his mind was still incomparably calm. Carefully but swiftly he moved toward the source of the noise.

The perpetrator must be someone who has been lurking in Xingyang City, secretly watching their fight against the Wagang Army. And then taking advantage of the moment when he and Shen Luoyan split up, he made his move and launched a surprise attack. This person was not satisfied just by obtaining the roster, he still had to subject Shen Luoyan to his beastly atrocity.

Fast like a ghost Xu Ziling ducked to the left and slipped to the right in the snowy forest; he tiptoed on the snowy ground, so that he did not create any noise at all. He even severed his mouth and nose breathing, and was only using the continuous internal qi to breath.

His eyes brightened, he was able to utilize the faint glow of the snow in the night, which average person would not be able to see, so that in that pitch-black forest he was able to distinguish objects and faintly see the fluorescent green of the snowy wonderland.

The sound of heavy breathing was becoming clearer.

Moments later, deep in the snowy forest a tall, majestic figure's back caught Xu Ziling's eyes. This man's shoulder was particularly broad, yet his waist was surprisingly slim; his long hair was draped over his shoulder, giving others a memorable impression.

This moment he was pressing Shen Luoyan's body against the trunk of a big tree. His pair of hands slipped inside the beauty's half-opened clothes, voraciously fondling her breasts.

Xu Ziling sent his power to increase his vision; he saw Shen Luoyan's face was beet red, her elegant eyes were tightly shut, her mouth was also tightly closed, the expression on her pretty face was a mixture of pain and contradiction, with tears across her whole face.

Every fondling of the man's hand brought a shiver over her entire body, plus a moan and a gasp.

A grating voice like a wolf in heat said with a laugh, "My, Dugu Ba, technique can turn a chaste woman [lit. woman who dies fighting for her honor or who follows her husband in death] into a whore, let alone you, a slut. After you have a taste of me, I guarantee that you, the Pretty Junshi [military counselor] will never leave me, and will obediently become my woman."

Moaning and panting, Shen Luoyan said, "Just kill me!"

Dugu Ba clicked his tongue and then with a strange-sounding laughter he said, "Your figure is so well developed, your skin is so tender and smooth, how can I bear to harm you? After you become my woman, you will be delighted to work for my Dugu Clan."

Shen Luoyan suddenly let out an especially intense moan, obviously Dugu Ba has violated the part that has caused her extreme discomfort.

From behind a tree Xu Ziling noiselessly flashed out, slowly creeping toward Dugu Ba.

He was certain that he was not Dugu Ba's match; the only way was to take advantage when the opponent's attention was completely absorbed in his lascivious behavior, to mount a sneak attack.

The golden hairpin rose up, it was aimed at Dugu Ba's back.

With a trembling voice Shen Luoyan said, "Even if you obtain my body, don't even think that you will obtain my heart."

Obviously Dugu Ba was extremely proud of himself; gasping for breath, he laughed and said, “Aren’t you in love with that kid just now whose smell of mother’s milk not yet dried? Were it not for you lost your soul and dropped your spirit after you two parted, I am afraid it would not be this easy for me to succeed, to enjoy Li Mi’s woman. Ha!”

This moment Xu Ziling was still about a zhang away from Dugu Ba. Hearing what was said, his spirit trembled a little, his footstep immediately getting somewhat heavier.

Unexpectedly Dugu Ba was able to react; his powerful body shook, as if he was moving.

Xu Ziling did not dare to hesitate. The gold hairpin shot out, while at the same time he also shot forward at full speed, his entire strength was focused on the middle finger of his right hand, piercing Dugu Ba’s back.

Although Dugu Ba was outstanding, he had never imagined that there existed a martial art expert who was able to conceal all phenomena of life, such as breathing, body temperature, heartbeat, et cetera, and was able, to certain degree, to become ‘invisible’. Combined with the fact that his attention was focused on Shen Luoyan’s alluring body, thus he was doomed to suffer this big loss.

However, even in this such a disadvantageous situation, he was able to traverse in time, avoiding the strike to hit the major acupoint on his back.

Just before the golden pin entered between his right ribs, it suddenly bounced back, while he also already traversed three chi.

Like a shadow Xu Ziling followed him toward his right side, and his finger jabbed again, the target was another vital acupoint under his ribs.

Before the finger arrived, a burning hot finger wind had already assaulted Dugu Ba’s body.

Previously the needle, which was full of true qi, had already stabbed Dugu Ba's muscles and bones, breaking the true qi protecting his body, enough for Xu Ziling's true qi to penetrate his body.

This time he was unable to endure the finger wind, so that he suddenly spouted a mouthful of blood and let out a wild roar. Turning around, he used the back of his palm to slap Xu Ziling's face.

Now the two men were fighting face to face.

Dugu Ba was around thirty years of age, his face was long and narrow, his eyes were also narrow and malicious-looking, his nose like an eagle's beak, his lips extremely thin, giving others an impression that he was a cruel man with lack of justice.

Xu Ziling changed his finger stab into a fist, meeting Dugu Ba's attack head-on.

'Bang!' Dugu Ba spurted another mouthful of blood; letting out a miserable scream, he ran away as fast as he could.

On the other hand, Xu Ziling was also jolted back three steps; the entire qi and blood in his body was surging, making him groaning inwardly. Even after Dugu Ba was seriously injured, his palm strength was still that formidable. Evidently, under normal circumstances, Xu Ziling was definitely not his match.

After regulating his breathing, he came over to Shen Luoyan, who was still standing with her back leaning against the tree, and her head down.

Shen Luoyan's clothes was still half-open half-closed, so that her 'ridges and peaks' were visible. The blush of her jade countenance has not faded yet, making her extremely captivating.

But her expression was unusually serene; with her shining eyes she looked at him up and down, sizing him up.

Xu Ziling was somewhat at a loss. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

‘Chi!’ suddenly Shen Louyan giggled. “I was just giving him a bit of hand and feet advantage, not a big deal,” she said, “If you are interested, I guarantee I won’t resist you.”

Xu Ziling was relieved, “Where is the book?” he asked.

Shen Luoyan raised her lily-white hand, letting him see she had a secure grip of the book. She smiled and said, “Don’t blame me as a horny b1tch; I deliberately moaned in loud voice to attract your attention, but I still did not expect you would come that quickly. When you showed up just now, I intentionally made up an act to distract his attention, while at the same time grabbing the book. When he was evading you, the book then returned to my hands!”

Concerned, Xu Ziling asked, “Is your acupoint still sealed? Why haven’t you straightened out your clothes?”

As if nothing had happened, Shen Luoyan laughed tenderly and said, “So that you can see! As soon as his hand left, I recovered my strength. Oh! Are you interested or not? Being messed up by him, I really want to have a man.”

Xu Ziling angrily said, “Go back to Xu Shiji! I am going to leave.”

Shen Luoyan smiled sweetly as she stood her lovely body up. Soon afterwards her clothes have been straightened out properly, and her jade countenance returned to its usual calm and composed look.

Xu Ziling picked up the golden hairpin and handed it over to her, saying, “Next time be more careful! Is that Dugu Ba a Dugu Clan’s man? His martial art is certainly very formidable.”

Shen Luoyan’s eyes flashed a murderous look; she hatefully said, “He is Dugu Feng’s only brother, but their age difference is twenty years. He is famous for having voracious desire for flowers and being lecherous, but his martial art skill is second only to You Chuhong and Dugu Feng. Next time you meet him, you are the one who really have to be more careful.”

“Let me walk you back,” Xu Ziling said.

Shen Luoyan cast him a sidelong glance and said, “Do you think I am a pitiful woman who is too weak to stand up to the wind? Were it not for him buried himself under the snow and taking advantage while my mind was not focused to mount a sneak attack, I would at least have the chance to fight and launch fireworks to call for reinforcements at the same time. Ay! I was really a bit reluctant to part with you, but you must not think that I am really falling in love with you!”

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, “How could I have such thought? The one you really fancy is Ba Fenghan, right?”

Shen Luoyan’s tender body shook; but as she was staring at him, Xu Ziling drew back, and then swiftly disappeared into the depth of the forest.

In the meantime, in another forest about ten li away from where Shen Luoyan was humiliated, Kou Zhong and Susu were crouching down at the edge of a cluster of trees. The former was concentrating completely on the situation outside the forest.

Susu said in a low voice, “Perhaps Xiao Ling is in trouble?”

“Of course not,” Kou Zhong replied, “If it were me, it would be hard to say! I dare say than Shen Luoyan has developed a subtle feeling for him; besides, it’s not like we have some unsolvable enmity between us, Xu Zhiji did not even know that Xiao Ling is his rival in love, Xiao Ling can certainly get away. But that’s really strange!”

“What’s really strange?” Susu asked.

“Why there is nobody tracking us,” Kou Zhong replied, “It’s a lot easier than tracking Xiao Ling.”

Susu said, “Didn’t you just say that in this kind of heavy snow Zheng Zong’s magic bird may become a stupid bird?”

Kou Zhong said, "If every time there is a wind or snow Zheng Zong could not find a solution, he need not come out to mingle in the Jianghu. Therefore, chances are he has other animals he trained to follow someone's tracks. Right now he is simply waiting for us to rendezvous with Xiao Ling, and then catch us all in one net."

Susu was horrified, "What should we do?" she asked.

Kou Zhong whispered, "First we must catch the animal following our track and eat it. Hey! How big are Jiejie's guts?"

Susu forced a smile, "You ought to be very clear about that," she replied, "Speak up! Whatever you want Jiejie to do, Jiejie will do it."

After Kou Zhong explained his plan in low voice to Susu's ear, Susu crawled up and went deeper into the forest. Kou Zhong put his ear on the ice-cold snowy ground, and applied his power to listen.

The sound of Susu's footsteps was immediately transmitted to his ear, but he did not hear any other unusual sound.

"Ah!" he suddenly heard Susu's tender voice shouting, startling him that he hastily ran over toward her. Turned out because Susu could not see a thing, she tripped over a shrub and fell to the ground.

Kou Zhong picked Susu up and whispered, "Zheng Zong personally came. This man is known as 'Flying Feather', his qinggong must be extremely superior."

"What should we do?" Susu asked.

Kou Zhong was about to speak, sound of hoof beats suddenly came from the northwest direction.

The two people's countenance changed suddenly. If they left just like that, wouldn't they lose contact with Xu Ziling?

Book 5 Chapter 8 – Familiarity At First Sight

Xu Ziling ran at full speed toward the jungle indicated by the marking Kou Zhong left behind.

After leaving Shen Luoyan, he immediately threw her to the back of his mind.

In fact, up to this time, when he was flying over the snowy ground, he had encountered not a few beautiful women, yet none ever occupied any place in his heart.

He was content just by practicing the energy cultivation of the ‘Secret to Long Life’; his mind was focused solely on the martial art training. It was not because he was after fame or fortune, but a personal pursuit; he wanted to surpass his own previous achievement.

Lying in bed every night, he immediately entered the state of mind where he trained his qi, the state of ‘forgetting object, forgetting self’ that fascinated the heaven and the earth.

Although during his waking hours he occasionally remembered Shan Wanjing, Yun Yuzhen, Shen Luoyan, and other beauties, but there were only vexation and loathing feelings in his heart, not the longing feeling between men and women.

Only martial art cultivation brought him the greatest satisfaction; in everything else he was satisfied with himself, and nothing he wanted to seek.

However, Kou Zhong’s ambition was clearly much bigger than his, so that he started to feel that their differences continue to widen with each passing day.

Other than that, speaking about deep affection for each other, naturally they were still the best brothers and the best of friends.

Right this moment, from a distant place ahead and to his left came the sound of hoof beats. It was the sound of horses' hooves kicking against the snow.

Xu Ziling was startled, but also felt strange.

The hoof beats came so suddenly, the only explanation would be that these people were already there, but were only showing themselves up this moment. Judging from the sound of it, there should be no less than thirty riders, yet previously he did not even hear any horse whinnying, so obviously these horses must be well-trained war-horses.

He rapidly eliminated the possibility that these people were from Wagang Army. Because Xu Shiji simply did not have time to make such arrangement.

Could it be that these people were related to Dugu Ba?

The hoof beats stopped abruptly, as abrupt as they appeared.

Xu Ziling found these mysterious riders unfathomable. Stretching his true qi to its limit, he darted toward the forest.

Kou Zhong's voice suddenly rang out, "Hurry up! Someone's coming!"

Knowing that Kou Zhong and Susu were still safe and sound, Xu Ziling immediately felt relieved, and bolted toward the voice.

Kou Zhong, with Susu on his back, jumped down from a big tree, and then side-by-side they ran deeper into the forest. Kou Zhong called out, "Let's see between they and us, who will have longer breath."

Xu Ziling relaxed his tensed body.

It should be noted that in this dense forest, which extended for hundreds of li, even using strong horses one could not travel easily. When it comes to leg muscles, the number of Jianghu people who could catch up with them in a short distance was not lacking, but other than people of Du Fuwei caliber, who would be able to compete with them in generating continuous internal breathing obtained from the 'Secret to Long Life', without feeling exhaustion at all?

Therefore, finished speaking that last sentence, they did not talk anymore. From external breathing they switched to internal, concentrating their mind and spirit on fleeing, fast like a meteor they weaved to the left and slipped to the right, leaped high and crouched low, in that dense forest, only trying to get as far away as they could.

On the other hand, Susu, who was crouching on Kou Zhong's back, was overcome with safe and warm feeling. These two boys were merely strangers coming together by chance, yet to her they had suddenly become brothers closer than flesh and blood siblings.

They always put her first in everything. No matter how bad the situation, they would never hesitate; even more, they would never cower. Currently they were sharing trials and tribulations together; hence the feeling in her heart was understandable.

They ran all through the night until daybreak, when they were finally out of the jungle. By this time the snowstorm has stopped, the heaven and the earth were blanketed in white, sparkling snow.

In the still, pure white open plains, the three of them were suddenly overwhelmed with 'what next?' feeling.

Although the two boys' inner breathing was still vigorous, their flesh and blood four legs were dead tired; hence they took this opportunity to rest on a small hill full of towering spruce.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "Finally! We escaped!"

"Who are those people last night?" Susu asked.

Xu Ziling replied, "I don't care what kind of saints those people are, I am sure they are not people of the good way; most probably they are Dugu Ba's men."

Kou Zhong and Susu were stunned. After listening to Xu Ziling narrating what happened the previous night, Kou Zhong frowned and said, "If that guy were not lecherous, perhaps we would have suffered a calamity. I did not expect Dugu Clan has such a formidable figure; I thought all of them were good-for-nothing characters like Dugu Ce."

Xu Ziling commented, "If they don't have a trick or two, how could Dugu Clan obtain the same fame in Jianghu as the other three Clans? All right! Tell me, are we going to Luoyang? Or going back to our old home Yangzhou?"

With head down, Susu resolutely said, "Go back to Yangzhou!"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged a glance. They said in low voice to Susu, "We want to go to the Eastern Capital, the purpose is to try our luck in finding the Jade Annulus of the He Clan. Hey! Not necessarily to look for Li Dage."

Susu shook her head and adamantly said, "If you want to go, the two of you can go on your own!"

Supporting Susu, Xu Ziling said, "Of course we should listen to Su Jie." Turning to Kou Zhong, he reproached him, "What could be more important than causing harm to Yuwen Huagu? The night is long, the dreams are many; if we miss this golden opportunity, are you going to assume the responsibility?"

Kou Zhong gave up. "I was wrong!" he said, "Hey! Which way to Yangzhou?"

Xu Ziling was stunned. "Didn't you already calculate the direction before leaving? How could you be this muddleheaded? Didn't you say you are proficient in mountains and rivers geography?"

"Stop arguing!" Susu said, "From here go to the northeast, sooner or later we will reach Tongji Canal. From there as long as we can find a boat going south,

passing Junyi, Chenliu, Yongqiu, Xiangyi, Songcheng, Yongcheng, Xiaqiu, we will reach Yutai. From there going east, we can enter Kangou, and then go south to Jiangdu. That simple.”

Red-faced, Kou Zhong said, “Turns out the most formidable one is Su Jie.”

‘Chi!’ Susu giggled and said, “It’s not that Jiejie is formidable, but that was the route we took that year when Jiejie followed Miss to the south.”

Xu Ziling asked in amazement, “How come Su Jie suddenly become bursting with joy?”

Susu’s jade cheeks turned as red as the sunset clouds, “Don’t talk nonsense,” she said, “I am not bursting with joy.”

The two boys were baffled.

Kou Zhong rubbed his tummy as he stood up and said, “Let’s find a town first to find a cure for serious illness of hungry stomach, and then we’ll make a plan.”

Xu Ziling helped Susu up and cheerfully said, “This time let Xiaodi [little brother] be Susu’s mount.”

Kou Zhong protested, “You always know how to fight over my enjoyment.”

Susu’s pretty face went beet-red as she said, “Turns out both my Didi are bad-eggs.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling laughed aloud as they pushed and shoved each other, very proud of themselves, and were brimming with sincere affection toward each other.

It was only this moment that the three of them felt the joy of free and easy life.

Susu was about to speak, the two boys suddenly froze up, and turned their

gaze to the west.

They saw three men on the snowy ground, like an arrow coming toward them. The distance between them was less than two li.

Susu jumped in fright, “Hurry up! Let’s go!”

Kou Zhong took a deep breath and said, “It’s too late!”

It was not clear which side did those three men belong to, but in the blink of an eye they were already ascending the small hill, and suddenly stopped in front of the three. The men cupped their fists in greeting; their manner was very polite.

The one in the middle was a man about twenty-seven, twenty-eight, wearing grey clothes. There was a cane strapped onto his back, there was a gentle, cultured manners in the midst of his heroic-looking features; a tough and stocky build man [orig. ‘back of a tiger and waist of a bear’], but there was something in his outer appearance that broke people’s heart.

From the other two men, one was a forty-something short and stout man, while the other was a middle-aged man dressed like a Confucian scholar. Both were extraordinary-looking men.

Just from the fact that even after running at full speed like that, the men were still calm and composed, it was clear that these men were top quality martial art masters.

The man in grey laughed aloud and said, “Finally we are able to catch up with two Xiongdi, we are indeed very pleased. I am Liu Heita, the Cavalry Commander under the banner of King of Xia.”

And then he proceeded to introduce the Confucian Scholar on his left, “This gentleman is known in Jianghu as the ‘Iron Fan’, Zhuge Dewei; he is also Ol’ Liu’s sworn brother.”

Zhugge Dewei waved his left hand, like magic a [folding] fan suddenly appeared.

‘Cha!’ the fan opened, and he lightly fanned himself a couple times; his manner was full of confidence.

Liu Heita pointed to the short and stout man and said, “Dong Shu [uncle, younger than one’s father] is known as the ‘Door God’. His skill is equally famous with the newly acquired general under Li Mi’s command, Qin Shubao, their fearlessness is without a rival.”

This ‘Door God’ was surprisingly modest. “Gongzi must not paste gold on my face,” he declined, “I am Cui Dong, only an errant-boy serving under Gongzi!”

Kou Zhong was bewildered, “Who is this King of Xia?” he asked.

Liu Heita replied, “No wonder the three of you did not know, our humble master Dou Jiande has founded a kingdom named Xia; it has not been announced to the world yet.”

The three people looked at each other; it was only then did they know that these men were on Dou Jiande’s side.

Liu Heita suddenly said, “Would Miss turn your back around? Because Ol’ Liu has a first meeting gift I’d like to present to these two Xiongdi, but I am afraid it will be frightening to Miss.”

Xu Ziling was astonished, “What first meeting gift?” he asked.

Susu apprehensively turned her tender body around.

Liu Heita smiled calmly; he gave a hand signal, the ‘Door God’ Cui Dong immediately untied a cloth bag, with some unknown object inside, hanging from his waist, and casually tossed it toward Kou Zhong.

Puzzled, Kou Zhong caught it, but very soon his countenance changed greatly. Immediately he tossed the cloth bundle back to Liu Heita and cried out in terror, “My Niang! Whose head is this?”

Amidst Susu's shrill scream, Liu Heita caught the bundle, calmly reached into it, and grabbed the head by the hair and took it out. Holding it in front of the two boys' eyes, he said, "Let Ol' Liu introduces him to you. This man surnamed Zheng, given name Zong, known as the 'Flying Feather'. If he did not lose his head and thus could not walk, I am afraid the three of you would have fallen into Wagang Army's hands."

Inwardly Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were scared and very nervous, but seeing the opposite party's men did not show any changes in their countenance, they suppressed their fear of this dead man's head. The former let out a dry cough and said, "Hey! Would Liu Xiong take this away first? We don't want to scare our Jiejie."

Although Liu Heita had no problem with that, Zhuge Dewei and Cui Dong's faces flashed a mocking look; obviously they looked down on these boys for being scared by a human head like that.

Liu Heita handed the head over to Cui Dong and said, "Hang this head on a prominent place as a way for us to greet Xu Shiji."

Cui Dong accepted the order and left.

With normal expression Liu Heita cupped his fist and said, "Now that two Xiongtai have become characters that everybody in the world wants to obtain, I wonder what your future plan may be?"

After exchanging a glance with Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong cleared his throat and said, "We don't know what kind of luck we have walked into that everybody believes we know the whereabouts of the Duke Yang Treasure, while the fact is ..."

Liu Heita showed his displeasure as he cut him off, "Kou Xiong, do you think I, the Ol' Liu, am also looking for you for the treasure? You are gravely mistaken!"

After a short pause, he continued, "This time we hit the road, is because we received King of Xia's order to confer with Da Longtou, to advise him to gain the initiative by striking first by eliminating Li Mi. Who would have thought that we

were one step too late, Zhai Mansion has become ashes. We investigated for many days before discovering that only the three of you escaped the great catastrophe. Not only that, you also turned the City of Xingyang upside down. You gain Ol' Liu's utmost admiration."

With her back still facing them, Susu asked, "Has the human head been removed?"

"Miss Susu, please set your heart at ease," Liu Heita apologetically said, "Human head is gone!"

Still with fear and trepidation Susu turned around. Looking at her moving expression, frightened and timid, as if she was asking for pity, Liu Heita could only stare blankly.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling did not care, but Susu asked, "One day earlier Miss was sent off by Laoye, she left under the protection of Tu Guanjia [housekeeper/manager]. I wonder if General Liu has heard any news about her."

Liu Heita replied, "With a martial art master of Tu Shufang's caliber protecting Miss Jiao, she should have no problem. I will dispatch my men to make inquiries on their whereabouts."

Susu laughed cheerfully and said, "With Gongzi giving your promise, Susu is relieved!"

Seeing her blooming-flower-like smile, once again Liu Heita could only stare wide-eyed on her. This time Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling noticed something different about him; all their eyes were on him.

Zhuge Dewei let out a dry cough and said, "Er Di [second (younger) brother], this place has danger lurks on every side, we'd better rush to Yangwu first, and then we can have a heart-to-heart chat over wine much more comfortably."

As if he was just awakened from a dream, Liu Heita noticed Kou and Xu, two boys' peculiar look; his old face turned red from embarrassment as he said, "As

soon as Dong Shu is back from his task, we will set out immediately. To tell you the truth, I feel instant connection with the two gentlemen [orig. people of talent appreciate one another (idiom)/to sympathize with one another]. This is the time the world's outstanding heroes rise up, a great time for those who are able to be kings. In sincerity I'd like to invite two gentlemen to join our army. In the future riches and honor we will enjoy together. If there is any fake word in me, let me, Liu Heita, not have a good ending."

Toward this young martial art master who was full of heroic spirit, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had quite a favorable impression; but joining his group was another matter altogether.

Kou Zhong let out a dry cough and said, "I also will tell you the truth; right now we have something important to do, about joining your precious side, let's talk about it a bit later."

Liu Heita looked disappointed; he said, "I hope the two gentlemen are really tied and not just finding excuses to decline the Ol' Liu's invitation."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling did not expect him to be this vain; they found it a bit hard to explain.

Susu interjected, "They really did not deceive Liu Gongzi, I can be their witness."

Liu Heita laughed aloud and said, "Since Miss says so, naturally I have no doubt. It's just that I was wondering if in this matter the Ol' Liu can be of any help?"

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Liu Xiong seems to have too much time in your hands, plus you are showing undeserved favor toward us, so we thank you in advance. However, this is a very delicate matter, involving our deep enmity with Yuwen Huaji; therefore, we simply cannot involve other people."

Liu Heita shrugged, "Turns out the widespread rumor in Jianghu that you have obtained evidence that Li Clan and Yuwen Clan are about to rebel is indeed not a wind from an empty cave."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other. It should be noted that only a few people were privy about this account book matter; who might have leaked it?

Xiang Yushan came to look for them, the two boys still did not think much about it; but now Liu Heita also said the same thing, the two boys started to be afraid.

Just one 'Duke Yang Treasure-trove' already made them jumpy and jittery, now the account book matter was piled on top of that; would they still have days of peace and happiness? Yuwen Clan alone was enough to give them a pounding headache.

In the meantime, Ciu Dong came back, Liu Heita stopped talking, he urged everybody to hasten.

Kou Zhong and the others also knew it was unwise to tarry, plus they had a good opinion on Liu Heita, hence they decided to travel together with them, so they set out toward Yangwu.

Book 5 Chapter 9 – Shaking Hands In Agreement

By nightfall, heavy snow started to fall again. After hastening on their journey, Kou Zhong and the others, six people, managed to cover more than forty li that day. Afraid that Susu would not be able to withstand the cold, plus coincidentally they came across an abandoned manor due to the chaos of war, they all decided to stop for the night, occupying one broken-down room, burning firewood, and sitting in circle to warm themselves.

Liu Heita took out his provision and fresh water, and politely offered it first to Susu, who was sitting between Kou and Xu, two boys. His demeanor looked like someone who was infatuated or intoxicated by beautiful face, but Susu did not seem to think anything.

Recalling about the sound of hoof beats against the snowy ground the other night, Kou Zhong asked, “Did Liu Xiong follow our trail last night?”

“You could say that,” Liu Heita replied, “Li Mi’s underlings would do anything, by hook or by crook, to get what they want, no one is willing to abide by Jianghu rules. Therefore, we have already guessed that they would not give up on the three of you.”

Xu Ziling was staring at the dancing sparks of the firewood; hearing him, he asked, “Then who were those riders? It seems to me they are not from the Wagang Army!”

“We are not sure either,” Cui Dong replied, “Two gentlemen’s legs were very, very fast, even with Miss Susu on your back, you still covered quite a lot of

distance.”

Kou Zhong laughed, “Fleeing for our lives, naturally we were running a bit faster than usual.”

Zhuge Dewei said, “Tomorrow we will reach Yangwu, where are the three of you heading?”

Susu said softly, “We will go back to Yangzhou first, and then make other plans.”

Liu Heita knitted his brows, “Yang Guang and Yuwen Huaji are in Jiangdu; if you reveal your track, I am afraid disaster will immediately come.”

“We will be careful,” Xu Ziling replied nonchalantly.

Looking at his determined expression, Liu Heita had no choice but to shut his mouth.

Kou Zhong changed the subject, “Your precious army occupies Leshou, which is in the north. I wonder if there is any new development lately?”

Zhuge Dewei replied, “The three most sensational news recently are the revival of the Tuyuhun [nomadic people of Xianbei], the Li Clan occupying Taiyuan in rebellion to the Sui, and Li Mi sent Zu Junyan to promulgate the ten major charges against Yang Guang to the world.”

Kou Zhong happily said, “Finally Li Yuan is willing to revolt!” His face showed a very proud look.

“Li Yuan can’t be considered anything,” Cui Dong said in disdain, “Unexpectedly he has the audacity to submit himself to the rule of Shibi Khan of the Tujue people, promising him to send the boys and girls, jade and silk, obtained from his conquest to Tujue people, so that he gained the ridicule of other people.”

Hearing this, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other, completely speechless.

Zhuge Dewei said, "According to the latest intelligence we acquired, Li Yuan proclaimed himself as the Great General, appointed Pei Ji as the Chief Historian, Liu Wenjing as the Minister of War, his oldest son Jiancheng, his second son Shimin, and the Commander-in-chief and the Second-in-command of their three armies, ready to advance to Guanzhong."

Giving a cold shoulder, Liu Heita said, "Li Clan is simply counting their chicken before they are hatched, they do not know what's in Liu Wuzhou's mind. As soon as Taiyuan is empty, it would be strange indeed if Liu Wuzhou did not seize that opportunity to attack Taiyuan. Moreover, along the route to Guanzhong, there are fierce generals of the Sui, Song Laosheng and Qu Tutong, along with their respective large army, separately guarding the pass. Li Clan's prospect, nobody dares to be optimistic."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly embarrassed; turned out the real situation out there was this discouraging.

Susu did not understand; she asked, "Don't the Li Clan know that submitting themselves to the Tujue is akin to leading the wolf into the sheep pen?"

Liu Heita smiled and said, "They are wolves themselves, so what's the problem with other wolves? Li Yuan's wife is a Xianbei woman; although they are not like Yuwen Clan who are barbarians per se, but they are hardly any better. Furthermore, the Li Clan are deeply influenced by barbarian customs, hence they are no different from the barbarians."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling recalled during the welcoming dinner that day Li Xiuning was wearing barbarian clothes; they had nothing to say even more.

It was half a day later that Kou Zhong finally asked about the Tuyuhun revival.

Liu Heita replied, "Tuyuhun are archenemies of the Tiele, its king, Fu Yun's ambition has always been very big, from time to time he sends martial art experts to the Central Plains to gather information. One time Yang Guang sent

Wang Yangxiong and Yuwen Shu, two generals to assassinate Fu Yun; they killed thousand of people, captured countless prisoners, but relying on his superior martial art skill, he led his brutal troops to kill their way out of the siege, and ran away to Dangxiang. These last couple of years, taking advantage while the Central Plains is in chaos, to send his entire army to recover lost territory, and to conspire on a large scale, becoming our Central Earth's major disaster outside of Tujue and Tiele, two ethnic groups."

Zhuge Dewei joined the discussion, "The most disconcerting thing is that Fu Jun's son, Fu Qian is a talent of this age; not only his martial art skill has reached perfection, his strategy skill is outstanding, and his ambition is not inferior to his father's."

Cui Dong laughed and said, ""They say that when he was born, he already had horned-dragon whiskers, hence since he was young he grew horned-dragon beard. Such a preposterous matter, only barbarian dogs can think of it."

'Chi!' Susu giggled tenderly. "A baby with horned-dragon whiskers, his appearance must be ridiculously weird," she muttered.

Looking at her cute and tender expression, and listening to her naiveté, Liu Heita could not help staring blankly at her.

Zhuge Dewei was wired up from the conversation; he laughed and said, "Do you want to listen to the ten charges Li Mi brought to Yang Guang?"

Kou Zhong was delighted, "Please, tell us quickly!" he said.

As if he was enumerating his family valuables, Zhuge Dewei listed in one breath, "One: patricide. Two: incest. Three: excessive drinking. Four: building palaces and pagodas, extravagant and wasteful. Five: exorbitant taxation, crushing common people. Six: cruising the world [tian xia], building great walls. Seven: sending punitive expedition to Korea, engaging in wars of aggression at will. Eight: refusing sound advice, killing the frank scholars. Nine: rampant bribery; persons of noble character are out of power, lowly people rise to important positions. Ten: going back on his own words. Ha!"

Xu Ziling shook his head and sighed, “No matter how we count it, we can’t enumerate all criminal charges against this fatuous ruler. Speaking about the deep disaster our country is in, this fellow can be considered unprecedented and never will be duplicated.”

Kou Zhong said, “He promoted his own family behind closed doors, sooner or later the imperial court will be dominated by him. The most terrifying thing is attracting foreign invasion, making our country’s territory all split up and in pieces, and the people are in a terrible situation. Yang Guang is the greatest sinner.”

Liu Heita slapped his thigh and said, “Well spoken. In today’s world, with the exception of Duke Jiande, who does not collude with foreign power and helping out each other? Since the two gentlemen already have ambition to be of help of the world, other than joining our army, is there any other alternative?”

Smiling wryly, Kou Zhong said, “Liu Xiong seems to think too highly of us, two brothers!”

Zhuge Dewei said with a laugh, “Jianghu has never been bustling with excitement like it was recently, probably the heaven’s good fortune has arrived, because outstanding heroes of the younger generation are rising. Other than Heita, the ones in the limelight most recently, from the men: Yang Xuyan, Ba Fenghan, the two Xiongdi, and one who called himself ‘Passionate Prince[1]’, Hou Xibai. But speaking about sensation, no one surpasses you, two gentlemen.”

Susu happily said, “Turns out my two Didi have become celebrities!”

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, “Our most formidable ability is to escape; I couldn’t believe it has made us this famous.”

Liu Heita burst out laughing and said, “Kou Xiong is too modest, not a genuine article and without good material, how could you have any qualification to escape? Furthermore, not only you were able to snatch the account book from Yuwen Chengdu’s hands, you also beat Yuwen Wudi, who considers himself unexcelled in the world, whose arrogance soared into the sky, that he escaped with his tail between his legs; how could we say that you have false reputation?”

Xu Ziling asked, "Just now Mr. Zhuge mentioned that these people are from among the men! What about the women?"

Liu Heita was about to speak, Kou Zhong's countenance changed as he hissed, "Someone's coming!"

Everybody scrambled to extinguish the fire. Cui Dong, who has just darted out to scout, flitted back inside the room, and spoke in heavy voice, "Too late! The enemy has already surrounded us heavily."

"How many?" Zhuge Dewei asked, "Who are they?"

"Ought to be more than a dozen," Cui Dong replied in low voice, "It's hard to see in the dark."

This moment, a nondescript, soft, androgynous voice came from the outside, "I am Tuoba Yu, under the order of my master [here, the word is 'shi', as in master-disciple relationship], Bi Xuan, to come with a specific purpose in mind to greet Kou Gongzi, Xu Gongzi, two gentlemen, and to inquire about your well-being."

Everybody's countenance changed; they did not expect that the visitor were Tujue martial art masters, even more surprising, Bi Xuan's disciple was the one on charge.

Liu Heita spoke in low voice, "He does not seem to know that we are mingling in here. Who has heard about this man?"

Both Zhuge Dewei and Cui Dong drew a blank and shook their heads.

To stall for time, so that Xu Ziling could tie Susu behind his back, Kou Zhong responded loudly, "We, two brothers are still as lively dragon and animated tiger, Tuo Xiong, no! It should be Tuoba Xiong, thank you very much for your concerns. This late at night, you still have us surrounded like this, afraid that we might escape. What is exactly your purpose?"

Seeing Kou Zhong had no weapon, Cui Dong took out his pair of weapons [orig. iron, but it could mean hard object or weapon in general] and stuffed one into Kou Zhong's hand.

Liu Heita himself was using a single cane as his weapon, but inside his overcoat, he hid a long dagger, almost a chi and a half in length, which he handed to Xu Ziling.

[1] 'Prince' is machine translator's result, orig. 'gongzi' (young master), but I thought 'prince' will go well with 'passionate'.

Tuoba Yu laughed aloud and said, "Your precious country has a saying, 'one does not visit a temple without a cause' [fig. to visit with an ulterior motive (esp. to ask for something)]. Xiaodi [younger brother, referring to self] this time came from a thousand li, on my master's order to borrow from the two gentlemen the Taoist treasure, the 'Secret to Long Life'. The journey was hard, so please two Xiongtai, do not disappoint Xiaodi!"

After a short pause, he laughed and continued, "I don't know the three renxiong [friend, honorific address, see also Book 3 Chapter 6] are which heroes? Why don't you let Xiaodi get acquainted as well?"

Everybody was shocked. Just from the keenness of this man's ears, it was obvious what kind of first-class master the opposite party was.

Liu Heita replied, "Just nameless soldiers, not worth Tuoba Xiong's hearing."

Tuoba Yu laughed three times.

The first laugh, he was still some distance away from the building. The second laugh, he was already at the door. By the third laugh, Tuoba Yu has already stepped over the threshold of the door to their room; calmly and leisurely as if he was exploring a friend's house. His left hand carried a lantern.

This man looked around twenty-five, twenty-six years old, his hair was tied in a warrior bun, he was dressed in warrior outfit with a leather vest on top of it. His appearance was attractive and intelligent, on his shoulders hung a pair of flying hooks. He looked a bit like a pampered son of a wealthy family; at first glance it looked as if he was too weak to stand up to the wind.

Everybody's eyes fell onto the flying hooks on his shoulders. In Jianghu, this type of weapon was rarely used; the two hooks were shaped like eagle talon, with a thin rope about a zhang long; with just one look people would know that this weapon was extremely hard to control.

When Tuoba Yu's eyes were sweeping across everybody's face, no one did not feel strange feeling. It felt like the opposite party's eyes carried some kind of formless, yet plain, unusual power.

Liu Heita took a step forward, laughed aloud, and said, "Let me get acquainted with Tuoba Xiong first." His right hand reached behind, the iron cane left his back and rose up; immediately a cold ray radiated all around, a dense cold air swamped everybody, but the target was Tuoba Yu's chest, the momentum was swift and powerful, it was indeed the air of a great general.

Kou Zhong and the others did not expect Liu Heita to make his move as soon as he saw the opponent; they were all delighted. Except for Susu who cried out in alarm and closed her beautiful eyes.

Tuoba Yu laughed aloud as he traversed sideways as fast as lightning, while his right palm shot out.

'Whoosh!' The edge of Tuoba Yu's palm sliced down on the cane's head. Liu Heita's earth-shattering move vanished instantly. It appeared he suffered loss; fast as lightning he changed style, and retreated backward.

Tuoba Yu's handsome face turned cold, as he sneered and said, "We have not gotten acquainted yet!" While speaking, fast like a whirlwind he suddenly moved to the blind spot on Liu Heita's left. It was unclear what kind of technique he was using, one of the flying hooks on his shoulder took off from the shoulder and flew like an eagle talon, creating a whistling noise as it split the air; swift like

lightning bolt it circled around toward Liu Heita's groin. A very sinister technique indeed.

These two exchanges happened like lightning flashes, dazzling the eyes of those who watched the fight.

Liu Heita was an outstanding character as well. In the critical situation, he did not panic. Knowing that the opponent did not give him the opportunity to take a breath, he spun his body around toward the door, and then brandishing his cane, it followed the flying hook like its shadow.

'Dang!' Following the clear ringing sound Liu Heita let a stifled grunt as he was pushed back half a step and crashed against the broken wall by the door.

Tuoba Yu let out a cold snort of contempt. His right hand reached toward the middle of the rope connecting the flying hooks; with a slight shake, the eagle talons on both ends immediately turned into thousands of dots of light, which, like a splash of mercury, stormed toward Liu Heita, who was leaning against the wall. At the same time, his left hand tossed the lantern, and it landed neatly on the horizontal beam above, not missing a single fen [1 fen is approx. 1/3 of cm or 1/8"].

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling watched with mouth agape.

Liu Heita's cane skill was brilliant; the technique, the vigor, the proficiency, all have reached first class level. Rarest of all, he had guts, bold and daring spirit, and did not have much regard for life and death; once he took out his cane, a 'sweeping thousand army' might took shape immediately. Who would have thought that this disciple of Bi Xuan was able to break through his defense and counterattack? In just a few moves he had him brought to a disadvantageous position; surely it was extremely shocking.

From this fact, it could be clearly seen that Bi Xuan was able to gain fame, to rise among the three top martial art masters inside and outside the Great Wall, everything was not for nothing.

Liu Heita let out a sudden roar; his cane withdrew and became a circle of rays

of light, protecting all vital points on his body, from top to bottom, as he shifted sideways while still sticking close to the wall. The body followed the cane, just waiting to mount an offensive.

Suddenly the cane ray was muted; turned out the iron cane was caught by the eagle claw's 'five fingers open wide' from one of the two Tuoba Yu's flying hooks, while the other eagle claw shot toward Liu Heita.

Nobody had ever expected that the opponent's eagle claw had this kind of freedom of action; they were all shocked by this extremely weird phenomenon. As Susu was screaming, like howling wind and torrential rain Zhuge Dewei and Cui Dong stormed toward Tuoba Yu. Seeing the critical situation, they disregarded Jianghu's rule and threw themselves into the battle.

Tuoba Yu laughed grimly; his left hand waved slightly, the eagle claw at the other end of the rope immediately turned into dots of sharp rays, like a tidal wave storming toward the two men. At the same time his leg flew up to kick Liu Heita's lower body; all his movements were calm and smooth, making the observers gasped in amazement.

Liu Heita unleashed his hidden ability; below he met the leg with his leg, above he seized the opportunity while the claw intertwined with the cane, to meet Tuoba Yu's internal energy head-on, trying to engage the opponent so that Zhuge Dewei and Cui Dong would have a chance they could exploit.

Amidst the sound of internal power collided and the continuous ringing on weapons clashing, Tuoba Yu did not hesitate to let the iron cane off, and released the full potential of the flying hooks, rolling up the three martial art masters inside the dots of sharp rays of the eagle claws. Every single move was an exquisite, beyond compare, consummate skill.

Although the battle inside was fierce, the enemy outside did not make the slightest noise; which was quite baffling.

With his right hand on the handle of the iron [see my note above], Kou Zhong stood outside the edge of the circle, watching Tuoba Yu's hooks with rapt attention.

Xu Ziling also focused his attention to the hard fighting of the four people; the astonishment in his heart was hard to describe.

Speaking about martial art skill, Liu Heita was definitely a level above Shen Luoyan. Even if he came across Du Fuwei, he would still have a chance to give a strong resistance. Zhuge Dewei and Cui Dong were also first class masters. Yet right now with the three's combined power, they were barely able to fight Tuoba Yu evenly. It is thus clear that one random disciple of Bi Xuan was already about the same level of martial art experts of Du Fuwei's caliber; how could Xu Ziling not be shocked?

Right this moment, Tuoba Yu suddenly let out a long laugh, and retracted his claws. It looked like a defensive move, yet it engaged the three men so that they all felt there was a formidable killing move within his move; unexpectedly, as if by prior agreement all four men leaped backward in four directions.

Merely based on this one move, where he was able to make the three opponents feel the threat of the flying hooks at the same time, it was clear that he had reached the 'using one move to communicate intention' level, a state of mind in which he relied purely on his qi power to control the enemy's mind.

Tuoba Yu's eyes shone with cold light, the flying hooks intersect; it turned into a column of rays, shooting in full power toward retreating Liu Heita. Shockingly, it was even a tad faster than the retreating opponent.

Zhuge Wude and Cui Dong cried out in alarm. [Translator's note: at the beginning, it was Zhuge Dewei, but somewhere in the middle it changed into Zhuge Wude. At first I thought it was a typo, but after several 'Zhuge Wude', I decided to follow the text.] But because they had withdrawn some distance away from each other, plus they were still being carried away by their retreating momentum, there was no way they would be able to render any assistance.

Tuoba Yu's battle strategy was indeed ingenious, his method was very ruthless, and his technique fantastic and mysterious; everything about him wowed the onlookers that their throat could not even cry out.

While it appeared that Liu Heita was about to be injured by this full-powered attack, Kou Zhong suddenly shouted, followed by his body moving sideways to the left to bump into Tuoba Yu.

For the very first time that night Tuoba Yu revealed an astonished look on his face, and was forced to abandon his attack toward Liu Heita. His flying hooks, one held back the other released, changed course to meet Kou Zhong's attack.

Against all expectation, like a fish Kou Zhong suddenly traversed diagonally for three chi, so that he was face to face with Tuoba Yu, and thus he was right in between Tuoba Yu and Liu Heita; proximity transformed complexity into simplicity, with just his head he struck toward Tuoba Yu.

Again for the first time that night Tuoba Yu revealed a serious look on his face; his hook became thousand shadows, he blocked Kou Zhong's simple, nothing-out-of-ordinary move.

'Pow!' The hook shadows dispersed, Kou Zhong let out a stifled groan, and was pushed three steps back.

On the other side, Tuoba Yu's entire body shook, he was also pushed half a step backward, his eyes were shooting deep murderous look as he stood face-to-face with Kou Zhong, who by this time was standing with his back bent down slightly like a crouching tiger who was unwilling to back off.

Everybody else stopped; nobody made any noise. The only thing audible was Susu's nervous breathing.

Among these people, Xu Ziling was the only one who understood that Tuoba Yu has incited Kou Zhong's fighting spirit that he forgot about life and death, and has entered the 'moon in the well' realm, which was far higher than his normal level of achievement. Combining the shenfa [pose or motion in martial arts] he learned from the swimming fish with the fantastic internal energy from the 'Secret to Long Life', he challenged Tuoba Yu's ferocity.

"That martial art was from the 'Secret to Long Life', right?" Tuoba Yu asked in heavy voice.

Kou Zhong smiled slightly, “How did it feel? Not bad, huh?”

Xu Ziling shouted, “The ‘Secret to Long Life’ is not in our possession. If Tuoba Xiong insists on getting it, we will rather die than submit. If that happens, not only Tuoba Xiong will not obtain the ‘Secret to Long Life’, people might get hurt. Would Tuoba Xiong please think it over?”

Xu Ziling’s comment was extremely formidable; it showed clearly their determination that they would rather be broken jade pieces than becoming roof tile, which matched the prowess Kou Zhong showed when he forced Tuoba Yu to retreat with just one move, yet there was also an intimidating power behind it.

In the meantime, Liu Heita and the others did their best to regulate their qi, preparing themselves to go all-out if they need to strike back.

Suddenly a charming laughter came from the outside, followed by a young woman appeared from the big window to their left. The girl was wearing a hat with beads of green-jade curtain in front on her head, and an oversized gauze gown on her body, but a pair of bare feet was peeking out from under her skirt.

Casually she leaned over the broken-down window, one leg stepping on the window sill, the other leg dangling down, swinging back and forth like a pendulum; looked like she was enjoying herself very much.

This girl was extremely charming and cute; there were freckles on her melon seed face and her two cheekbones like the stars in the sky, giving the impression of a witty, wild and brutish girl. Her handsome eyes were long and enchanting, the jet-black pupils of her eyes were twinkling with wild, untamed animal-like look as she was sizing Kou Zhong up and down with great interest, as if the other people did not exist at all.

However, everybody’s eyes were fixed on the odd-shaped dagger, which was usually hanging on the waist, but at this time was in her hand as she was playing with it.

This kind of dagger was very popular among the Tujue[1], the blade was

slightly curved, the front part sharp, the back slanted, with no hand-protector, the hilt was only wrapped with strips of cloth, the blade started straight and curved down to pare, it was ground flat without any dent. Because the edge of the blade was only about a cun [approx. 1 inch/a thumb] wide, it was extremely sharp. Plus the dagger in this girl's hand appeared to be of a very high quality. Under the illumination of the lantern, which was sitting high on the beam, it flickered with cold rays. Just from her sudden appearance, it was clear that her martial art skill was not inferior to Tuoba Yu.

This cute girl's mouth pouted; she shifted her gaze toward Xu Ziling, and spoke in disdain, "Turns out the Central Earth is full of foolish conceits [orig. Yelang thinks highly of itself], no wonder Yang Guang overestimated his own capabilities and sent a military expedition to Gaoli [Korea]. I, Chunyu Wei, want to see your 'rather die than submit' thingy."

Tuoba Yu laughed aloud and said, "My Shimei [martial (younger) sister] is accustomed to be favored by Shizun [venerable master]; gentlemen, please don't mind her. This time Xiaodi received the order to request the 'Secret to Long Life'; not to rob or seize by force. Shizun did say that after he has a quick look on the 'Secret to Long Life', he will immediately give it back, and in return, he will pass on a different set of consummate skills to each of Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong. I am asking two Xiongtai not to mistakenly think of our Master as someone who only want to take advantage of other people."

Everybody exchanged a glance with each other; they all felt that Bi Xuan did not fail his poise as the grand master of this age.

Chunyu Wei smiled sweetly at Kou Zhong and said, "Your martial art skill is not bad! However, this time we came here, other than the two of us, brother and sister, there are still 'Duobei Desert Eighteen White-horse Riders' who are also personally trained by Shizun, every one of them is dauntless and fear no death. If we fight, I am afraid not many of you will escape alive."

After a short pause, she continued, "I forgot to tell you that as long as you are still breathing, we will have a way to grant a new lease of life for you, then won't we be able to get the 'Secret to Long Life'?"

Her voice was tender and sweet with a slight foreign accent that it gave some

kind of exotic flavor.

Tuoba Yu frowned and said, “Shimei, could you be a bit more polite? If we could avoid fighting, certainly that would be best.”

Two martial brother and sister, one hard the other soft, especially since Tuoba Yu had already demonstrated his power in pressurizing the group of heroes, certainly they were putting these people under a lot of pressure. Much less there were still at least eighteen powerful opponent, which were personally trained by Bi Xuan, waiting outside, hence which side was strong and which side was weak was very easy to see.

By this time they had formed a small circle, protecting Susu, who was strapped onto Xu Ziling’s back, forming a barrier that clearly demarcated the opposing sides.

Liu Heita laughed aloud and said, “It’s hard for soldiers and generals to avoid dying in battle, if the Heaven destines me, Liu Heita to die in this fight, Laozi [I, your father] will not knit half of an eyebrow. No need to talk too much, let it be decided under our hands.”

This man’s natural character was heroic and brave, immediately everybody’s fighting spirit was aroused.

Tuoba Yu took a step forward and said in astonishment, “Turns out Sire is the number one general under Dou Jiande, Liu Heita; no wonder your hands are that strong. But there is one thing Xiaodi does not understand. It is apparent that we all can exchange weapons of war for gifts of jade and silk [i.e. turning hostility into friendship], but why did Liu Xiong strongly advocate for battle?”

Liu Heita knew Tuoba Yu was trying to divide his side; inwardly he cried out, ‘Formidable!’ Yet without the slightest hesitation he said, “Supposing this time Tuoba Xiong came only to discuss about borrowing a book, there was no need to deploy so many manpower. It shows clearly that you are relying on force to demand the book. However, now that we have three more people on our side, Kou Xiongdi’s power thus exceeds your brilliant anticipation, hence you changed your tone of speech, from ‘demanding’ to ‘borrowing’. Did I say it wrong?”

Chunyu Wei laughed and said, "Of course you did. This time we came to the south, borrowing the 'Secret to Long Life' is just one of our missions. The other important matter is to hunt and kill that evil disciple Ba Fenghan, to cut his stinky head and present it back to Shizun. Do you guys understand?"

Susu, who had been silent, suddenly spoke out, "If we give the book to you, can you guarantee that you will no longer disturb us?"

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were about to speak, but then they swallowed back the words into their belly, because they simultaneously thought that even if they hand over the book to Bi Xuan, he would not be able to make any sense of what he was reading anyway. Therefore, they did not see any reason to sacrifice everybody's life just for the sake of this book.

Tuoba Yu happily said, "It is best that Miss is so reasonable. Whatever our Master has said, he always keeps it. In fact, Zaixia [lit. under] does have the intention to make friends with Liu Xiong, Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong. If we all can be polite and amiable, nothing can be more perfect than that!"

Kou Zhong said, "Honestly my hands are itching very much right now, I really want to fight; winning or losing is not a big deal. However, not fighting also has its own benefit. It's just that we buried the 'Secret to Long Life' in a secret place, it will take a considerable effort for us to get it and hand it over to you. Problem is, we need to resolve an affair before we can handle this matter. I wonder what is Tuoba Xiong's opinion about it?"

Chunyu Wei interrupted, "You are very interesting, so amusing that I like you a lot!"

When everybody heard that, they could only stared blankly with mouth agape; nobody had ever expected that this loveable and charming girl would publicly announce her interest in some stranger man.

Tuoba Yu laughed and said, "My humble Shimei has always been this straightforward, but the number of men she likes actually cannot be counted, Kou Xiong must not take it to heart."

Chunyu Wei crossly said, "How could Shixiong say such thing about me? This time it is different!"

Kou Zhong facetiously asked, "Isn't every time different than the others?"

Liu Heita and the others could not help feeling amused; they never expected that the three parties who were originally with swords drawn and bows bent would suddenly be tangled up in this matter.

Chunyu Wei was going to speak, but Tuoba Yu cut her off, "We still need some time to hunt and kill Ba Fenghan anyway, supposing I give two gentlemen half a year time, would you be able to fetch the 'Secret to Long Life'?"

For the first time everybody started to have favorable impression on this eccentric Tuoba Yu, whose hands were unspeakably ruthless, simply because he attached most importance to keeping his words. Only people who keep his own words would put his trust that other people would also keep their words.

"It should be enough," Kou Zhong replied, "Half a year later we will meet in Luoyang. Even if we still don't have the 'Secret to Long Life' in hands, we will take Tuoba Xiong to go fetch the book."

Tuoba Yu raised his cupped fist and said in a loud and clear voice, "It's settled then. Xiaodi asks to be excused."

With a flash he was already outside the door.

Everybody turned their eyes toward Chunyu Wei, but this girl had already disappeared as well.

It was quite a while later that Liu Heita exhaled a mouthful of cold air and said, "This time Ba Fenghan's little life is really in danger!"

None of the others did not share the same sentiment. If Bi Xuan's two regular disciples were that formidable, wouldn't that mean that Bi Xuan's martial art

skill was much higher than anybody could imagine?

[1] The text added 最利马戏 'zui li ma xi' after this sub-sentence; the closest I could find after googling it was 'shamsir' and 'scimitar'. A search on 'Turkic dagger' returned 'Kilij'. So I don't really know what it is.

Book 5 Chapter 10 – Yuwen Chengdu

The farther north they travelled, the weather was growing colder and colder, the snow on the ground reached knee depth. The six of them forged ahead at full speed on the sea of forest and plains of snow, which extended as far as the eye could see. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling took turn carrying Susu on their backs.

After their battle against Tuoba Yu, they were more careful, not daring to be as negligence as the previous day.

The snowstorm has stopped, the heaven and earth was a vast expanse of desolation, with occasional howling of the wolves, that as they heard it, their hair was standing on its end.

After hastening for two days, one evening they reached the forest around the southern bank of the Tongji Canal. The deep dark-colored forest looked like a wall or a rampart, layer upon layer, standing up all around, if one was not careful, it would be very easy to get lost.

Even if their bodies were made of iron, after running away for their lives like that for a couple of days, they would be extremely exhausted. It was not clear who started it, but eventually everybody slowed down until finally they walked as slow as marching ants or crawling tortoises, as they looked for a lodging place that could provide shelter from the wind and the snow.

The mountain and the forest were blanketed in complete silence [orig. ten thousand pipes are still], only noise they heard was the rustling of soft snow underneath their own feet.

Occasionally a light wind would blow, shaking the snow on the branches that it rained down to the ground below and filled the air with snowflakes.

Finally they stopped in a clearing in the middle of the forest. Liu Heita said, "Looks like tonight we cannot find an abandoned house or a cave to spend the night, so we'll have to put up with building a bonfire in here and sit until daybreak before hasting up on our journey tomorrow. According to my estimation, we will reach Yangwu by tomorrow afternoon."

In the meantime, Susu slipped down from Xu Ziling's back onto the snowy ground below. Although she was wearing cotton coat, she was still shivering in cold. Without the slightest hesitation Liu Heita took off his sheepskin coat and draped it tenderly over her shoulder, while speaking softly, "When we get the fire going, it won't be so cold anymore."

This iron man was showing so much consideration and thoughtful action, it was quite touching, actually.

"Liu Dage is not afraid of cold?" Susu gratefully asked.

Liu Heita laughed and said, "After being in battle for so many years, what kind of hardship I haven't been through? Su Jie, set your heart at ease!"

Xu Ziling took off his outer robe and spread it over the snowy ground; he said with a laugh, "Now I am really not afraid of cold, unlike the mighty Liu Dage. Su Jie please sit down."

Susu knew that due to his 'Secret to Long Life' internal energy, he really was not afraid of either hot or cold; she gladly sat down.

Kou Zhong reached out and wrapped his arm around Liu Heita's shoulder; he said with a giggle, "Let me give Liu Dage a bit of warmth! Hey! You, this fellow, are lacking in manners, you just copying us calling her Su Jie; you ought to call her Su Mei [younger sister]."

After many days of close association, they had known each other better. The

two boys grew very fond of this brave and cunning young general. Cui Dong did not like to talk, but he was a hot-blooded man. On the other hand, Liu Heita's sworn brother Zhuge Dewei always gave out the impression that he was a slick and sly man, while his actual character was a gloomy one; he did not seem to like the two boys too much.

Seeing Liu Heita was showing some interest on Susu, Xu Ziling had a mind to play matchmaker, so that Susu might forget Li Jing. Turning to Susu, he said, "Su Jie's legs had to be bent all day long, right now you must be numb and sore, while we are going to fetch firewood, why don't Liu Xiong give you a leg rub?"

Susu jumped in fright. "I am all right," she cried out in fear, "No need to rub!"

Liu Heita's black face turned red [Translators note: 'hei' from Liu Heita's name means 'black'], "I'll go fetch firewood," he said. And then with Cui Dong and Zhuge Dewei he left without saying anything.

Susu said, "You should also go to help!"

Xu Ziling sat down by her side and shook his head, "If we go, who would protect Jiejie if the hungry wolves are coming?" he said.

Susu shivered, and no longer dared to insist.

Kou Zhong sat down on her other side and muttered to himself, "I wonder if Xiao Ling also has the same feeling; beginning yesterday afternoon, I have a feeling a disaster is looming ahead. Sometimes this feeling was strong, sometimes it was weak, as if someone was hanging on our tail."

Overwhelmed with shock, Susu said, "What should we do?"

Xu Ziling exposed an astonished look; he blew out a mouthful of breath, which became fog, and said, "I thought I was being paranoid, turns out you are having the same feeling. There must be a martial art master following our trail, seeing that we are of many men with a great force, he is forced to wait for an opportunity to make his move."

Kou Zhong said, "If his target is the account book in our hands, what he wanted to get hold of at first must be Su Jie, so that he could use her to threaten us. So no matter what happens, we must have at least one person by Su Jie all the time."

Xu Ziling said, "The enemy is in the dark, we are in the open; the one who will suffer losses will be us. I wonder if there is a way to turn the table around and lure him out to the open!"

Kou Zhong happily said, "What do you have in mind?"

Xu Ziling said, "When Dugu Ba plotted against Shen Luoyan the other day, he had himself buried in the snow, and then when she passed through, he seized the opportunity to attack. We can copy his trick."

Right this moment, there was a howling of the beast from a distance; hearing that, Susu's hair stood up on its end, and she threw herself on Kou Zhong's back.

Kou Zhong continued, "This person was able to follow us for a day and a night, and is still undetected, obviously his skill is extremely superior. Besides, he can't possibly accidentally walk through right above you. Dealing with him will require our cooperation." And then he added dejectedly, "How are we going to bury ourselves in the snow anyway?"

Xu Ziling triumphantly said, "I had thought about that problem before. Look!" Finished speaking, he moved away a little, lay down on the snow, closed his eyes and applied his internal energy. Soon the snow on which he lay melted, and his whole body sank in, and Xu Ziling disappeared underneath the layer of snow.

Kou Zhong knew that he was using his internal energy to generate heat; while he was inwardly cheered, Liu Heita and Zhuge Dewei came back with large pile of dry branches in their hands. The latter asked in surprise, "Where is Xiao Ling?"

Kou Zhong and Susu laughed; they immensely proud of themselves. Kou Zhong said, "A wolf ate him!"

Liu Heita was displeased; he dumped the dry branches in front of the two people, and said with a laugh, “Quickly call him back to scrape the snow from these sticks. Su ... hey ... Su Mei might be too cold.”

“Where is Dong Shu [(younger) uncle]?” Susu asked.

Zhuge Dewei replied, “He was afraid dry ration would not help Miss Su resist the cold, so when he heard the sound of wild animal, he went hunting!”

Liu Heita plopped his butt on the snow next to where Xu Ziling buried himself; he was still completely oblivious. “I am best at roasting meat, I guarantee after eating it, Su Mei won’t be cold anymore!”

Kou Zhong remembered something; he sprang up and cried out, “Not good! Quickly call Dong Shu back, don’t let him go alone!”

Before he even finished, there was a violent hiss coming from a distant place in the southeast direction.

Zhuge Dewei’s hands shook that the branches fell off to the ground; his countenance changed. “It’s Dong Shu!” he said.

Liu Heita already leaped up and pulled Kou Zhong, who was about to run, back. “Stay here and protect Su Mei,” he said, “Where is Xiao Ling?”

Kou Zhong did not have time to explain, he cried, “He is all right! Go quickly!”

Liu Heita, two people, felt their hearts were burning, without thinking anything, they shot away like an arrow.

Kou Zhong had a brainwave; he spoke to Xu Ziling under the snow, “Don’t come out no matter what! This must be the ‘luring the tiger away from the mountain’ stratagem.”

As soon as he finished speaking, a dark shadow descended from the sky, with

astonishing power the wind from the palm strike pressed down on the top of their heads.

While Kou Zhong was thinking of grabbing Susu and brought her rolling away to the side, the strong wind already arrived. Left with no other options, he raised both fists upward to meet the enemy's palm head-on.

There was a powerful 'Bang!' Kou Zhong felt his arms were about to break, his brain felt as if a lightning has just struck him, and his body was jarred that it flew backward. By this time his combat experience was already very rich; the moment before he fell, the true qi inside his body already circulated several times, neutralizing the enemy's 'destroying the heart, splitting the lungs' force.

By the time he struggled to stand up, Susu already screamed, because she had fallen into the incoming enemy's hands.

This kind of martial art skill was extremely frightening.

The man had one arm wrapped around Susu, the other hand was pressing on her tianling acupoint [top of the head]; he roared in laughter and said, "Kid, stay where you are, you move half a finger, your Jiejie won't live."

It was only then did Kou Zhong see clearly that the opponent was a middle-aged man that appeared full of confidence, heroic, but also at ease. His nose was especially big, so that his eyes appeared slim, but his eyeballs flickered with very cold rays, that it chilled those who looked at him.

Kou Zhong pulled the iron [see my note in previous chapter] Cui Dong gave him for self-protection. "You dare hurting her?" he angrily roared, while in his heart he was praying that Xu Ziling would not come out of the snow right this moment, otherwise Susu's life would be in danger. An idea popped out in his head, he called out, "Kid, you must also stay where you are. You should not make any move until I say so."

How could the man know that he was speaking to Xu Ziling, who was buried in the snow? With a cold laugh he said, "You are so scared that you turn mad. Just stop talking, get the Dongming Pai's account book out and give it to me.

Otherwise this baby girl will lose her life.”

Kou Zhong signaled Susu with his eyes, telling her not to panic. When he was about to speak, Liu Heita and Zhuge Dewei rushed back. Seeing Susu had fallen into the enemy’s hands, they both roared furiously, and then together with Kou Zhong, they formed a triangle with the enemy surrounded in the middle.

“Where is Dong Shu?” Kou Zhong called out.

Liu Heita’s eyes flickered fiercely, but surprisingly his expression was heavy and cold. He slowly said, “He had fallen into this thief’s evil scheme.”

Kou Zhong was terribly grieved. “Who are you?” he asked, “What enmity do we have against you?”

“I am Yuwen Chengdu,” that man calmly replied, “How could there be no enmity no grudges between you and I? If you are done chatting, I am going to count from one to ten, if you haven’t handed the account book over to me, your Jiejie’s head will burst open.”

He paused, and then, “Huh? Where is that Xu kid?” he asked.

Everybody shivered inwardly; they knew that among the four top martial art masters of the Yuwen Clan, Yuwen Chengdu’s rank was only a tad lower than Yuwen Huaji. Although he might not necessarily be able to defeat their combined power, but they could forget about stopping him either.

Afraid that he might suspect Xu Ziling’s whereabouts, Kou Zhong fetched the account book from his pocket and lifted it up high above his head. “Release Su Jie,” he said, “I will toss the account book to you.”

Seeing the account book, Yuwen Chengdu’s eyes lit up. Rolling his eyes, he let out a cold snort and said, “If I release her, but then you did not hand the account book to me, won’t I suffer heavy losses?”

Kou Zhong mockingly said, “Is your head stuffed with straws? Such a simple

matter you failed to understand. Now I am going to withdraw two zhang back but put the account book on the ground. You tell my Jiejie to pick it up and throw it to you. But remember, before my Jiejie picks the book, you must not move even half a step. Otherwise, my two companions will immediately attack you.”

Yuwen Chengdu thought that if that was the case, then could always take the initiative to lay his evil scheme on Susu. Nodding, he said, “So be it. You must not play any trick, otherwise I can send out a palm strike over the empty air to take your Jiejie’s life.” While in his heart he had made up his mind that as soon as Susu threw the account book to him, he would kill Susu at the same time, so that Kou Zhong would be grieved and his mind would be a confused mess.

Kou Zhong called out loudly, “You must act according to my order!” Naturally this sentence was directed to Xu Ziling.

By this time Yuwen Chengdu no longer cared to argue with Kou Zhong. Seeing Kou Zhong really put the account book down and backed away, he eagerly pushed Susu forward. “Pick the book and throw it over!” he ordered.

Naturally Susu understood Kou Zhong’s plan. With weakened knees, she forced herself to walk toward the account book.

Kou Zhong withdrew about a zhang and a half and stopped; gathering his strength, he waited.

Susu stopped in front of the book. Her knees gave up, she fell sitting down on the snowy ground.

Yuwen Chengdu anxiously called out, “if you want to live, throw the book here!”

Susu was a bit lost; she stared blankly at the book in front of her. Kou Zhong suddenly thundered, “Now!”

Yuwen Chengdu still thought that Kou Zhong ordered Susu to hurry up and

pick the account book. Suddenly a wave of snow burst forth from behind him, followed by a violently hot palm strike hitting his back; it was only then did he realize that he had fallen into the enemy's scheme. While spurring a mouthful of blood forward, his palm struck backward; to his surprise, however, he struck empty air. Knowing that the situation was not good, he hastily pulled back and leaped away.

Meanwhile, Kou Zhong already rushed toward Susu. Liu Heita and Zhuge Dewei also soared; one cane and one fan attacked toward Yuwen Chengdu midair.

While his first attack went smoothly, Xu Ziling's second move hit empty air. This Yuwen Chengdu was indeed a first-class martial art master; although he was unable to guard against Xu Ziling's palm strike against his back that he was injured and spurted a mouthful of blood, his true qi reacted and shocked Xu Ziling that blood and qi surged, which rendered him unable to pursue.

The three men exchanged blows midair. Yuwen Chengdu screamed miserably. Although he managed to block Zhuge Dewei's iron fan, his left shoulder was hit by the extremely angry Liu Heita's cane that his bone broke and his flesh split, and he was thrown sideways.

But this man was really outstanding; he was still able to rouse his qi and landed on the branch of a large tree nearby. Borrowing the momentum, he ricocheted and flew like a bird into the depth of the forest; in a few blinks he disappeared in the darkness.

The pit of Cui Dong's stomach was hit by a palm strike, his sternum fractured and he perished. Everybody was inconsolably grieved; they vowed to avenge this great enmity for Cui Dong. That very night Liu Heita looked for a rather secluded spot on an elevated ground, dug a deep hole, and spread large rocks over the place where he buried Cui Dong, so that hungry wolves would not catch the smell and dig the corpse and eat it.

Recalling that it was because Cui Dong wanted to find a game to be roasted to help her resist the cold that he went alone and was murdered by Yuwen Chengdu, Susu cried uncontrollably that her tears rained down like pear blossom. Recalling that Cui Dong died because of the account book, Kou Zhong

and Xu Ziling's grief was inconsolable; but they were also greatly puzzled.

Surprisingly, it was Liu Heita who was open-minded. After kowtowing in front of the grave, he spoke to the tombstone in a loud and clear voice, "Dong Shu, you went a step ahead of us. After Xiao Hei [little black, from Liu Heita's name] takes advantage of this numerous and disorderly world and damn play for a while, a bit later I will go down the spring [i.e. underworld] to find you to play finger-guessing game and drink wine."

And then he walked over to Susu, who was supported by Kou and Xu, two boys; smiling, he said, "Su Mei, please don't be sad, summer went, winter came [Translator's note: the 'dong' in Cui Dong's name means 'winter'], to be born, to grow old, to get sick and to die, life is nothing more than that." Finished speaking, he preceded the other to leave.

With a grim expression Zhuge Dewei said, "Let's hit the road! If others don't kill me, then I will kill others. After fighting several battles, everything will be clear!"

Hearing that, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were somewhat comforted. Helping Susu up, they followed the two men continuing their journey toward Yangwu.

By midday, they cut through the mountain and fields toward the official road of Yangwu. They saw the road packed with refugees who were leaving Yangwu, pedestrians and carts fighting over the road, the cries of grief shook the heavens, so that the people who were already suffering from the intense cold weather became more miserable and flustered.

Liu Heita and Zhuge Dewei keep their calm in the face of the unexpected; their expression remained aloof as they tried to ask around. They found out that Li Mi recaptured Liyang Storehouse, Wang Shichong led his main force to reinforce the Sui Army, but was defeated by Li Mi. Li Mi then recruited a large number of surrendering Sui soldiers and generals, so that his fame and power was greatly flourishing; he was about to march toward Yangwu; therefore, common people in the neighboring area abandoned their homes to flee.

After hearing this news, Susu was aghast, "Li Mi is coming! We must run away now!" Hearing Li Mi's name, her countenance changed as if she was hearing a

tiger was coming.

Liu Heita led them into the woods next to the road to get away from the crowd; he said with a laugh, "If you think these people are running away from Li Mi, you are gravely mistaken. These are peasant families from the rural counties near Yangwu. What they are afraid of is the defeated troops would scatter in all directions and looting the people. Yangwu closed its gate and not allowed them to enter the city, hence they had no choice but to flee for their lives first."

Zhuge Dewei said, "Li Mi is the best at buying the people's heart, chances are he will send grain to relieve the people; how could those common people fear him?"

Frowning, Kou Zhong asked, "If that's the case, won't we be able to enter the city as well?"

Liu Heita had already planned in advance, "Leave this matter to me," he said, "We have several officers of Yangwu who have dealings with us in secret, plus I have an official pass. As long as we are willing to spend a few pennies, bringing in two or three more people inside won't be a problem."

Zhuge Dewei said, "We also have some connections with the clans and societies in there, if the three of you still insist on going to Jiangdu, we can make some arrangements to have you take a boat. It would definitely be a lot more comfortable than going on foot!"

Xu Ziling said, "What I am afraid the most is Yuwen Chengdu waiting for us there. After all, Yangwu is under the influence of his Yuwen Clan."

Liu Heita said, "Before entering the city, I can disguise the three of you first, turning you into granpas and grandma. We will also change our appearance to avoid attracting undue attention."

Zhuge Dewei proposed, "It would be best if we enter the city in two batches, it would be even more foolproof."

Kou Zhong slapped his thigh and cheered, "I have heard about disguising skill in Jianghu, turns out two gentlemen are experts in it," he said, "Would it be possible for you to teach us, brothers and sister, a trick or two? It would help us as self-protection skill when we have to escape."

Liu Heita gladly said, "I only have superficial knowledge on this, Dage is the genuine expert; within our army, he occupies the first place. If you want to learn, you'd better beg him to teach you."

Zhuge Dewei laughed and said, "Such a trivial trick, there is no need to use so much fuss on me; we all are friends in times of tribulations, to be able to catch your appreciation, you don't know what a privilege that is to me."

The three people's favorable impression on Zhuge Dewei suddenly enjoyed a great boost. Chatting and laughing, they went against the flow of people leaving Yangwu. Temporarily the grief of Cui Dong's demise was pushed toward the back of their heads; their life force has returned.

Book 5 Chapter 11 – Imperial Court's End Of The Road

Kou Zhong washed the disguise from his face and hair; breathed a sigh of relief, he said, "I didn't know disguise can be so difficult to bear. Look! My skin is red."

Xu Ziling was squatting by the stove on the other side of the kitchen, rinsing his face with cold water, after seeping it with freshly boiled water; deeply in agreement he said, "This kind of starch paste Wei Ge [older brother, referring to Zhuge Dewei] concocted is indeed a first-class deceiving trick, but it is also a first-class evil punishment."

They were in an ordinary courtyard house inside the city of Yangwu, Liu Heita's guarantee indeed came about as predicted, the five of them entered the city in batches without a hitch. After settling them down in this house, which was the secret hideout of the Dou Army, Liu Heita and Zhuge Dewei went out to observe outside activities and scout for information.

Kou Zhong went over to Xu Ziling's side and whispered, "Do you think the Old Liu has some interest in Su Jie?"

Xu Ziling was wiping the last piece of starch paste off his forehead; he was about to wash his hair when he heard what Kou Zhong said. "Not just some interest," he replied, "He is very interested. When he looks at Su Jie, his eyes seem to be shining."

But then he sighed and said, "But it appeared that Su Jie is avoiding him!"

Kou Zhong assumed the haughty manner of an expert; acting as if he was taking things very seriously, he shook his head and swayed his noggin and said, "Girls are like that, the more she is interested in you, the more she will act indifferently, playing with your emotion and driving you crazy. She will even lure you and make your heart unbearably itchy. In terms of qualifications, Old Liu is not at all inferior to Li Dage, plus he knows how be particularly attentive and spare no effort to win her sympathy. I don't believe Su Jie's heart is not moved." While speaking, he handed the towel to Xu Ziling.

Xu Ziling took it to dry his hair; he said in a low voice, "Do you want to fix them together? But Old Liu will go to war three hundred days in a year; if Su Jie marries him, won't she have to keep watch of an empty boudoir alone? Plus she will always worry that he wouldn't come back."

With a wry smile Kou Zhong said, "I was thinking of the same thing. But if she marries Li Dage, won't it be the same? The most important thing is to gauge Su Jie's heart. Let me go out to sound her out."

Ignoring Xu Ziling's advice to stop, Kou Zhong went to the eastern wing where Susu's room was. Knocking on the door, he called, "Su Jie!"

"Come in!" Susu replied.

Kou Zhong pushed the door to enter. Susu was leaning against the window, looking outside; she appeared to be enjoying the snow scenery of the small garden in the middle of the courtyard. He came over behind her and said in a low voice, "Does Jiejie have something in your mind?"

Susu trembled slightly, "No!" she replied, "There is nothing."

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Is it that fellow Liu Heita?"

Susu turned around, her almond eyes opened wide, she said crossly, "What are you talking about? Ay! You are thinking that far already."

“Don’t you feel that he is especially good to you?” Kou Zhong asked.

Susu rolled her eyes on him, “Don’t be meddlesome,” she said, “You always love to let your imagination run wild. Are you tired of Jiejie following you?”

Kou Zhong cried out to Heaven for the injustice, “How could Su Jie have such thought? We just care about you!”

After staring at him for quite a while, Susu sighed; half-leaning onto the windowsill, she gloomily said, “Liu Dage is a one-hundred percent hero, but ... ay! Jiejie really don’t know how to explain it!”

Kou Zhong happily said, “That means Jiejie has a good impression on him; what’s so difficult to explain?”

Susu shook her head sorrowfully; reaching out to pat Kou Zhong’s cheek, she hung her head down as she said softly, “You wouldn’t understand the burden in Jiejie’s heart.”

Kou Zhong was dismayed, “If Jiejie did not tell me the burden in your heart, how could I understand?” he asked, “Looking at Jiejie’s appearance, I am truly heartbroken.”

Susu pondered silently for half a day; finally she smiled bitterly and said, “Every time I see Liu Heita, it’s just like I am seeing Li Dage. They both are of the same type of person, Jiejie is very scared. Do you understand what I am saying?”

Kou Zhong had no idea that she was having that kind of feeling and thoughts; greatly stunned, he was speechless for quite a long time.

Susu forced herself to look excited as she said, “Jiejie has decided that from now on I will serve and take care of you, two wild boys, I won’t marry for as long as I live; so in the future you must not be heartbroken for Jiejie’s sake.”

Kou Zhong lost the interest to talk; he finally said, “Jiejie must not set any rules for yourself like that; otherwise, if you meet someone that you fancy, you might

miss the opportunity because of these words.”

Susu was slightly angry, “Jiejie has given this matter careful consideration, I don’t need you to lecture me.”

This moment Liu Heita’s voice was coming from the main hall, the two people hastily went out of the room. Seeing the abundance of food and drink Liu Heita has purchased and brought back, without any trace of politeness Xu Ziling sat down in front of the table and started to chew. Kou Zhong and Susu promptly joined him.

Susu watched as the three men busily sending the food to their bowls and to their mouths. “Where is Wei Dage?” she asked.

Liu Heita replied, “Yangwu water transportation is extremely scarce nowadays, money alone is useless, we must also have some power. Dage is trying to talk with Baling Bang people, they are the only one who can tread on both black and white ways right now [i.e. both underground (criminal) and official] right now; other clans and societies are out of the question.”

Kou Zhong, three people, looked at each other; they did not expect that in the end they still had to deal with Baling Bang.

Noticing their unusual expression, Liu Heita asked in surprise, “Haven’t you had any dealings with them before?”

“It was not a dealing per se, just some encounters,” Kou Zhong replied, “Liu Xiong, have you heard the name Xiang Yushan?”

“Not only heard, I even met him face-to-face once,” Liu Heita replied, “This fellow is one of the newer well-known figures of Baling Bang. He knows a lot about business, rather popular in both the black and white ways; his public relation skill is exceptionally good.”

Hearing this, Kou Zhong could only stare blankly; he had never imagined that such a second-rate character like Xiang Yushan could also have some standing in

Jianghu.

Liu Heita lowered his voice, “Although this person’s martial art skill is sloppy and very ordinary, he is very resourceful. Currently, Yang Guang’s two most favorite imperial concubines, one is Madame Xiao, the other is Zhu Gui’er. From what I heard, Zhu Gui’er was personally presented to that fatuous ruler by Xiang Yushan.”

“If that’s the case,” Xu Ziling said, “Why did Yang Guang send an assassin to murder Baling Bang’s big boss?”

Liu Heita said, “These things, we, as outsiders, can hardly understand.”

“What other news did Liu Dage hear?” Susu queried.

The beauty stooped down to ask information, Liu Heita felt he gained a lot of face; excitedly he replied, “Naturally the situation is very good: last month Li Yuan started a rebellion from Taiyuan; Li Mi repeatedly gained victory; Du Fuwei, Fu Gongyou, two men, flaunt their power in Jiang Huai, our army is known as Mighty Yan and Zhao [my dictionary gives ‘beautiful women’ as alternate definition]. The only places Sui household can defend right now are the western capital Chang’an, eastern capital Luoyang, and Yang Guang’s nest Jiangdu, Yangzhou. Other places, like where we stay temporarily, Yangwu, are basically without any ability to defend itself. The high-ranking military officers guarding the city are merely looking around to see which side they would surrender to!”

Xu Ziling excitedly asked, “How’s the situation of the Li Clan?”

Liu Heita shrugged, “They rely on help from the Tujue, becoming their hunting dog; there is nothing left to say.”

Xu Ziling was greatly disappointed; he also had nothing left to say.

“There is one this that is really puzzling,” Liu Heita went on, “The rumor in Jianghu is that the two of you know the secret of the Duke Yang Treasure Trove. Whether this is just a rumor or not, Xia Wang [king of Xia] and I have repeatedly

researched it, and our final conclusion is that this treasure is just make-believe tales.”

“Why do you think the treasure does not exist?” Kou Zhong wondered.

Liu Heita said, “When Yang Guang murdered his own father and declared his independence, he also murdered his brother Yang Yong. In this matter, Yang Su had expended a lot of effort for him. At that time Yang Guang was still putting on the cloak of righteous ruler on him, so he showed a lot of favor and trust toward Yang Su. Although time and again he wanted to kill Yang Su, on the surface he did not show the least bit of sign. This was about a year before Yang Su died. Logically speaking, Yang Su would not have the mind to rebel or hide a treasure.”

Xu Ziling joined in, “It’s possible that the treasure was prepared during the Emperor Wen, Yang Jian’s time [c. 581-604 AD]. Due to Yang Su’s rigorous schemes and deep foresight, he ought to know that high meritorious service would shake the master, nothing good ever comes out of it.”

“That is a reasonable argument,” Liu Heita said, “But later on Yang Su’s son Yang Xuan raised an army in rebellion, his men did not even have a single decent weapon, and oftentimes he lacked the fund to pay the soldiers’ salary. This does not make sense. How could Yang Su not tell his son about the hidden treasure?”

Kou Zhong could not resist, “The place where Yang Xuan rose in rebellion is Liyang, the western capital’s mountain is long and its water far, perhaps he did not have time to get the treasure!”

Liu Heita slapped the table and laughed, “Two Xiongdi’s Jianghu experience is indeed too shallow; in just a few sentences you uncovered the secret to me that the treasure is at the western capital.”

Xu Ziling indignantly said, “Who would have thought Liu Xiong would swindle us?”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “Liu Xiong just wanted to coach us in discipline. But we only know that the treasure is in Guanzhong. Before Niang could tell us,

she already passed away. Otherwise, who knows? Perhaps we would give the treasure to Liu Xiong.”

Liu Heita was delighted, “Hearing what you said is enough. Honestly, I don’t believe such treasure would accomplish much.”

This moment Zhuge Dewei came back. He sat down and said, “Tonight Baling Bang may have a ship sailing for Jiangdu, with a cargo of all kinds of thread, gauze and satin for the muddleheaded ruler, so that the fatuous ruler can have his people cut it into flowers and leaves, and sew it onto the branches, and spread it over the pond, just so that he could enjoy the beauty of spring and summer in the middle of the winter. I already made arrangement; you can hitch a ride with that ship. This time Baling Bang really gives us a face.”

Liu Heita sighed and said, “Death is near at hand, that muddleheaded ruler still does not repent.”

And then, broken-hearted at having to part, he said, “We are going to part company!”

Susu hung her head low, she did not dare to meet his gaze.

Kou Zhong’s blood was boiling; straightening up his body he said, “Liu Xiong, I have something I’d like to ask your guidance in private.”

Liu Heita was a bit surprised; as he followed Kou Zhong toward the garden outside, he asked in low voice, “What is it? Are you hard pressed for funds?”

Kou Zhong patted the money pouch hanging on his waist; assuming a rich man air, he said, “We have enough money to spend on wine and pleasure, Liu Xiong need not worry.”

Then, lowering his voice he said, “I noticed that Liu Xiong is showing some interest on our Su Jie, is that correct?”

Liu Heita’s thick face turned scarlet. “In this kind of matter, naturally I cannot

conceal it from you two,” he admitted, “The strange thing is, I have met not a few girls, but as soon as I saw your Jiejie, it’s hard for me to maintain self-control, ay!”

Kou Zhong was puzzled, “This is a good thing,” he said, “Why did Liu Xiong sigh?”

Liu Heita dejectedly said, “Five years ago, someone told my fortune by reading my facial features. He said my mountain root [don’t ask, I don’t know what it is ...] appears too low, my two eyebrows are squeezing my qi extensively, perhaps before I turn forty one I would have passed. Therefore, I have made up my mind, I will enjoy my forty years of life without the slightest hesitation. Other things, I dare not think.”

Kou Zhong downplayed his remark, “How can we believe Jianghu charlatan’s words?”

Liu Heita smiled wryly and said, “Problem is, that person was not a Jianghu charlatan at all; rather, it was the Number One Expert of the Central Plains, Ning Daoqi. And it was because I was not afraid of the truth that I implored him repeatedly before he was willing to tell me.”

Kou Zhong was severely shaken, “Have you seen him?” he asked.

Liu Heita’s face revealed an awed expression; he nodded and said, “Only for a moment, and in a hurry. But his simple, relaxed and calm demeanor, I will never forget until the day I die.”

Reaching out to pat Kou Zhong’s shoulder, he said, “My deep affection for your virtuous sister can only be buried deep in the bottom of my heart; I do not dare to implicate her. Furthermore, when I come back this time, I am going to fight in one place after another all around the world [tian xia, *i.e.* China], life or death is unpredictable, I don’t know if in the future I will have the good fortune of seeing the three of you again. Kou Xiongdi’s good intention, Xiongdi is deeply grateful.”

What else could Kou Zhong say?

Heavy snow was starting to fall from the sky, again.

By nightfall, Baling Bang sent a carriage to pick up the three people. With heavy heart Liu Heita and the others bade farewell to the three people; recalling that they might never meet again in the future, everybody's heart was brimming with sorrows.

After taking a seat in the carriage, Susu was overwhelmed with emotion, she bowed her head and shed some silent tears. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were scared; they did not dare to disturb her, they simply looked out the window, silently watching the snowflake fluttered in the air along the street.

The driver, Baling Bang man, was polite and very hospitable; he drove straight out of the gate toward the big pier by Tongji Canal outside the city, led the three people to a skiff, and a moment later they reached a huge five-mast ship anchored in the middle of the river.

The three have just stepped foot on the deck, someone, beaming from ear to ear, already greeted them, "Kou Xiong, Xu Xiong, Miss Susu, how are you?"

"Ah!" Susu was pleasantly surprised, "It's Xiang Gongzi!"

The man welcoming them was unexpectedly Xiang Yushan. Noticing the ill expression on Kou and Xu, two boys' faces as they looked at him, he hastily bowed respectfully with clasped hands and said, "Two Dage must not blame Xiaodi, I have done everything in my power to find you three's whereabouts, but all those hard works accomplished very little. Fortunately I guessed correctly that to go to Jiangdu, unavoidably you will have to pass through Yangwu, so I came here to wait for your news. Sure enough the Emperor of Heaven did not turn his back on resolute person, in the end I can meet once again with the three of you!"

With 'frigid irony and scorching satire' Kou Zhong said, "We were also very fortunate not to go to your Peipei or what have you, or else we would have fallen into the Wagang Army's hands early on."

Xu Ziling let out a cold laugh and said, "Xiang Xiong indeed know how to introduce us to good people."

Xiang Yushan was shocked, "Is there such thing?" he asked, "Humph! If verified, Xiongdi will definitely punish the traitor according to gang rules."

Kou Zhong said, "If we encounter something in the future, how would we know that you will not betray us like Peipei?"

Xiang Yushan feigned helpless ignorance as he lamented, "How could Kou Xiong look down on me, Xiang Yushan, like that? If I have that kind of intention, let me not have a good end."

Susu could not bear not to say something, "We did not know Xiang Gongzi have his own problem, you two must not blame him again."

Xu Ziling swept his gaze around; he noticed the sailors were raising the anchor and untying the sail in preparation to set off. Turning to Xiang Yushan he said, "Very well! But if we discover later on that you are playing trick on us, I will immediately tear you apart."

Xiang Yushan indignantly puff out his chest and said, "The three of you may set your heart at ease, I, Xiang Yushan is definitely not a despicable man."

After a short pause, he continued respectfully, "Xiaodi has prepared a banquet inside the cabin, especially in honor of the three of you. Miss Susu, please!"

After staring at Xiang Yushan for a few seconds, Susu gladly walked over, Xiang Yushan delightedly led the way. Seeing Susu accepting the invitation and entered the cabin, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had no choice but to follow behind her.

The cabin was brightly lit, plus there was a stove in the corner, so that it was as warm as springtime. In the middle of the room was a table of sumptuous banquet, by the table was a beautiful lady in white. Leading four good-looking maids, she bowed to greet the guests.

Xiang Yushan made the introduction, “Xiao Dajie [big sister] is the younger sister of our humble gang’s Fu Bangzhu [Deputy Gang/Clan Leader] Xiao Xian; she manages the daily expenses and necessities of the imperial concubines in the imperial palace, she knows the imperial palace situation like the back of her hands. With her working out a strategy, this time Yuwen Clan is in danger.”

[Translator’s note: so far I always translated Bang as Clan, like in Beggar Clan (gai bang), or Clans and Societies (bang hui) just because this term is widely known in our circle; however, since in this story there are a lot of references to ‘family clan’ (fa), I feel that I need to differentiate these two. So ... I will make conscious effort to use ‘gang’ instead of ‘clan’ when referring to these organizations.]

This Big Sister Xiao was about twenty years or so, in terms of beauty, she was inferior to Shen Luoyan, Shan Wanjing, and the like, but her figure was like standing jade, her body alluring, her bearing elegant; in short, she was sexually very attractive.

Big Sister Xiao’s laughter sounded like the ringing of a bell; absolutely unrestrained, she sized Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling up and down, and laughed again before even speaking, “You are fine specimen indeed, no wonder as soon as he saw you, Yushan has such a high regard of the two gentlemen!”

Awkwardly Xiang Yushan cleared his throat and said, “Please sit down.”

After everybody was seated, the pretty maids poured wine into their cups and then withdrew from the cabin.

Susu did not drink wine, she asked for fragrant tea instead. Xiang Yushan, who was sitting next to her, politely served her.

With licentious look, Big Sister Xiao repeatedly urged Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling to drink their wine; it was such a warm atmosphere.

After three rounds of drink, Xiang Yushan said, “Know yourself and know your enemy, and you will never be defeated [idiom, from Sunzi's ‘The Art of War’]. I wonder if two Dage are familiar with Yuwen Clan’s affairs.”

Kou Zhong was particularly blunt toward Xiang Yushan; knitting his brows, he said, “If you don’t tell me, how would I know?”

Big Sister Xiao laughed coquettishly and said, “Yushan is so bad, when he started, he gave two Gongzi bad impressions. Just consider this cup as my apology on behalf of Yushan.”

Since she spoke up the load in their mind in such a forthcoming manner, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt embarrassed instead; they promptly drank their cups.

Like a blossoming flower Big Sister Xiao smiled toward Susu and said, “If I had two good Didi like Miss Susu, I would be extremely thrilled.”

At first Susu was uncomfortable with this young – but acted as if she was a seasoned windblown dust [i.e. prostitute] who had gone through everything – woman, who incessantly threw flirtatious glances toward Kou and Xu, two boys; but with such flattering remark, her ill will immediately diminished greatly. A smile burst open on her pretty face.

Xiang Yushan was a bit mesmerized by her flourishing fresh flower-like smile; he sighed and said, “If I could be like Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong who have a sister like Miss Susu, that would be really good!”

Susu rolled her eyes at him; her pretty face blushed, she hung down her head and said in a low voice, “How could Susu dare to accept the compliment? I am only a maid.”

Xiang Yushan replied in earnestness, “I don’t care what Miss Susu’s status is, in my, Xiang Yushan, heart, you are a fairy from heaven.”

Susu’s pretty face blushed even redder, but her expression showed that she was delighted.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged a glance; they both felt it was inappropriate. The first time Susu met Xiang Yushan, she already spoke up on his

behalf. If this time Xiang Yushan mixed some sweet nothing in his old hand technique to arouse the romance and thus force his way inside her heart, wouldn't it be very bad?

While both of them separately plotting a countermeasure, Big Sister Xiao said, "About Yuwen Clan's affairs, let me tell you! The two most formidable persons in Yuwen family are Yuwen Shang and Yuwen Shu. The former concentrates fully on martial art training. Along with the Song Clan's 'Heavenly Saber' Song Que, they are known as the Central Plains' two greatest martial art masters after Ning Daoqi. His martial art skill is matchless, but he never set foot in officialdom. He begets two sons, Yuwen Chengdu and Yuwen Wudi."

Kou Zhong was dumbstruck. "I thought Yuwen Huagu is his son, turns out he is not," he said.

Big Sister Xiao shook in laughter like a flower at the trip of a branch. "Yuwen Huagu?" she said, "Fancy that you came out with that name."

Kou and Xu could not avert their eyes from her silky breasts, which were trembling in sync with her shaking body due to the laughter; they found it to be highly captivating.

Xiang Yushan interjected, "Yuwen Shu successively held high positions in the imperial court, until his nobility rank reaches Guo Gong [state duke], the highest possible official positions. He has three sons; Yuwen Huaji is the oldest, followed by Yuwen Shiji [士及] and Yuwen Shiji [智及]. Although Yuwen Shiji is not among the four great martial art masters of the Yuwen Clan, but since he is the most inscrutable, we must never underestimate him."

Big Sister Xiao continued, "Yuwen Shang never held any official position, his specific responsibility is Jianghu matters. From Yuwen Shu's three sons, Yuwen Huaji inherited his father's Guo Gong nobility, his official position is the Commander of the Right Reserve Officers, and the Zongguan [Chief Manager] of the Capital. His second son Shiji married Yang Guang's daughter Princess Nanyang, so he is the Sui Dynasty's prince consort."

Xiang Yushan joined in, "Yuwen Shiji [the third son] is proficient in wood

construction. Yang Guang's minor jail, north of Jiangdong city's Guiyan Palace, Huiliu Palace, Songlin Palace, and the others, the 'Shugang Ten Palaces', were all built under his supervision."

Xu Ziling breathed out a mouthful of cold air, "Yuwen Clan is in such a close relationship with the imperial household, how could one account book make any difference?"

"That's why we must make a careful plan," Xiang Yushan said, "Otherwise we won't be able to harm them but suffer a heavy loss instead."

It was only now did the two boys realize the dangerous nature of their mission; it was definitely not as easy as they thought.

But they were already riding on the tiger's back; there was no way they could shrink back.

Book 5 Chapter 12 – The Battle Of Two Clans

Xiang Yushan made arrangement that the three stayed in the cabins on the second level just below the top deck; the other three cabins across the hall, two belonged to Big Sister Xiao and Xiang Yushan. As for the last cabin, Xiang Yushan did not reveal the occupant's identity to them.

For the last few days, Susu has been tossed from side to side, she was already exhausted. After the banquet, her qi bubbled up, she immediately went back to her room to sleep.

Kou Zhong went to Xu Ziling's room to chat. "This time we are doomed," he said, "Looks like Su Jie has some interest toward that Xiang fellow. I don't understand it, even toward someone like Liu Heita she did not show any regards, but toward this fellow, whose face green and whose lips white all year long, who looks like he never have enough to eat, she could have good impression."

Xu Ziling was certain, "I have no doubt that Su Jie's real sweetheart is still Li Dage. I just don't know what had actually happened between the two of them that made Su Jie's heart seems to be dead to him. No way! We must not let Su Jie fall in love with this fellow with dirty past."

Kou Zhong said, "Unless we leave right away, it is very difficult for us to get involved in this kind of matter. But if we avoid the problem by walking away, we must think first whether Su Jie will be willing to, also not only it does not make sense, we will even lose the opportunity for revenge. Could it be that we can take the account book on our own and stop the sedan chair to cry out our grievances? [Translator's note: the picture here is stopping government official on the street (who was usually traveling by riding sedan chair) to lodge a complain.] With one chop Yuwen Huaji would be able to kill us."

“Do you trust that Xiang kid?” Xu Ziling asked, “If we dare to believe his words, simply hand over the account book to him, let him deal with it. And then we can go to Luoyang to look for Li Dage. That would be better than watching Su Jie with worried frown all day long.”

“What do you mean worried frown?” Kou Zhong countered, “Didn’t you see that Xiang kid managed to coax happiness from her just now? But your proposal worth considering; if we came across Yuwen Huagu in Jiangdu, our little lives would be difficult to protect!”

Xu Ziling shook his head and said, “Still won’t work. Niang’s enmity must be avenged by us personally, if just because of little difficulty we then use someone else to achieve it, we are practically letting our own conscience down.”

Kou Zhang was cross, “Crooked, it was you who said it; straight, it was also you who said it, but now you seem to blame me?”

Xu Ziling smiled apologetically, “Just consider I am in the wrong! Hai! That loose Dajie [big sister] seems to be very interested in you; perhaps tonight she is going to grope your bed!”

Kou Zhong jumped in fright, “Don’t talk nonsense,” he said, “If she found out that I am a green-head kid [i.e. a rookie], and afterwards she revealed my sealed red-packet, will I still a face to live my life? Ha! When we return to our hometown in brocade gown later, we must visit the biggest brothel, that Tianxian Lou [tianxian – fairy, lou – storied building], to look for that place’s most popular Miss Yuling to accompany us for a drink. Who knows? Based on our status, we may be able to get intimate with her.”

Xu Ziling was not the least bit interested; he said, “If you want to go, then you can go alone! Just make sure you won’t bump into Yuwen Huagu.”

Kou Zhong was astounded, “Since when did you change your nature? Previously, didn’t you want to hang around in the brothel more than I do?”

As if he still had some lingering fears, Xu Ziling said, “Every time we went to the

brothel, which one did we have good ending? If you don't have the guts to look for a woman to accompany you for a drink, just ask that Xiang kid to come with you. Perhaps Tianxian Lou also belongs to his family."

Kou Zhong's eyes grew big. "Ha! I get it," he said, "Your interest is on that Zhen Sao who sells steamed buns [see Book 1, Chapter 1 & 2]. Kid, you are really bad!"

Xu Ziling was so angry he nearly punched Kou Zhong to teach him a lesson. "Am I that kind of person?" he furiously asked, "Zhen Sao is Old Feng's concubine. If you keep speaking nonsense, I won't talk to you anymore."

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Dage, please calm down. I just saw that you are too uptight, so I deliberately provoked you. You knew so well that brothels are very dangerous, yet you still want me to go alone to take risks? Can you be considered my brother?"

Unable to argue with him, Xu Ziling helplessly said, "Just do whatever you want to do! But you must never let Su Jie know."

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted, "We have learned a little bit of disguising skill anyway, we could disguise ourselves as a bit older men, Yuwen Huagu has not seen us for many years, even if he came face-to-face with us, I guarantee that he would not have any idea."

Right this moment suddenly there was a knock on their door, Xiang Yushan's voice said, "Are two Dage still awake? May Xiaodi come in to chat for a moment or two?"

The two boys frowned, but they really had no reason to refuse; without any better option, they had to let him in.

Xiang Yushan sat comfortably in front of them; he said with a laugh, "I am accustomed to sleep late, I can't sleep before the third watch [between 11pm – 1am]. I am really jealous of people who have the good fortune of falling asleep as soon as they lie down like Miss Susu."

Kou Zhong stood up; he left the bed and walked over to sit in one of the chairs by the window. Giving Xiang Yushan a sidelong glance, he said, “No wonder your face is green your lips white all day long, like people who are drowsy.”

Xiang Yushan let out a wry smile and said, “My countenance is unsightly, but it’s definitely not because of lack of sleep, but two years ago, when I was training internal energy, I suffered fire deviation. Kou Xiong misunderstood!”

Xu Ziling was astounded, “So that’s how it is. What exactly was the martial art that created a problem?”

Xiang Yushan seriously said, “Have you heard about the ‘Yin Hou’ [Empress Yin] Zhu Yuyan?”

The two boys shook their head with blank expression.

Xiang Yushan said, “I am not surprised that you have not heard about her. ‘Yin Hou’ Zhu Yuyan is the Sect Leader of Yin Gui Pai [not sure if it means anything or perhaps a place name: yin – negative/feminine (from yin-yang), gui – tenth in order, pai –sect/school]. It is said that this Sect is the most mysterious gang or sect [bang pai] in Jianghu, extremely heretical. They are the mortal enemy of the equally mysterious, unfathomable Ci Hang Jing Zhai [again, not sure how to translate this: ci – compassionate, hang – boat/to sail, jing – calm/not moving, zhai – building/fort]. Every once in a while, both factions would send out their prominent disciples to have a life or death decisive battle against each other. It is said that whichever faction lost, for the next twenty years no one from that faction is allowed to take even half a step in Jianghu. Fortunately, for the last hundred years or so, Ci Hang Jing Zhai has always been the winner, otherwise, if Yin Gui Pai appeared and do evil, I really don’t know what kind of disaster would befall the Jianghu.”

Listening to his narration, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were ‘you look at me, I glance at you’, thinking that anything that happened in Jianghu, nothing could be considered too bizarre.

“So this Zhu Yuyan is very formidable?” Xu Ziling asked.

Xiang Yushan breathed out a mouthful of cold air, “Do I need to tell you that? Our previous generation considered her to be the number one martial art master of the heretical world. According to our intelligence, after nearly a hundred years, the most outstanding masters Yin Gui Pai sent out are extremely confident that they would defeat Ci Hang Jing Zhai’s representatives in the next battle. If that were the real case, the ups and downs in the Jianghu would have another variable that is a lot more difficult to predict.”

“Is this person a man or a woman? Young or old?” Kou Zhong wondered. [Translator’s note: in Chinese ‘he’ and ‘she’ sounds the same, although Xiang Yushan used female radical.]

“That, I do not know!” Xiang Yushan replied, “My father has a bit of relationship with one of Yin Gui Pai elders, the information we have actually came from him, but it is limited to that much. Those who want to enter Yin Gui Pai, every single one of them must make heavy oath never to divulge any Sect matters to outsiders. That elder was drunk and had a slip of the tongue; afterwards he was extremely remorseful and implored my father not to tell others what he had just said.”

Kou Zhong was baffled, “If that’s the case, why is it that you have no scruples in telling us about this matter now?”

Xiang Yushan angrily said, “Because it was because of him that I trained and damaged my body. Before leaving, he wrote a secret instruction on how to train martial art, telling my father to practice it. Realizing that he himself is not a good material to train upper-class martial art skill, my father handed over the secret manual to me. Who would have thought that it was something harmful? If the practitioner cannot refrain from sexual desire, his meridians and qi will deviate and he will perish. Not only that, once one started, one will be addicted and will practice endlessly until fire deviation occurs. Fortunately I have always been lazy, plus I don’t like to sleep around with women. After suffering fire deviation, Jing Xian [sic, I think previously it was Xiao Xian] Bangzhu [gang leader] wasted considerable energy to save me, so that I did not become a handicapped person. Tell me, should I keep a secret for someone like him?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stared blankly; it was only then did they realize that such a vicious, despicable man existed in the world. They could not help

sympathizing with this Xiang Yushan fellow.

Kou Zhong cleared his throat and said, “I can’t believe you don’t like sleeping with women.”

Xiang Yushan embarrassedly said, “It’s not that I don’t like sleeping with women, it’s just that I don’t like to frequent brothels [orig. to pick the flowers and trample the grass], unless it’s with the woman that I really like. After fire deviation, my power diminished considerably, otherwise, why would I stop if I achieved any success?”

“Are you completely recovered now?” Xu Ziling asked.

Xiang Yushan dejectedly replied, “If I am fully recovered, my countenance would not be so unsightly. Every time there’s a wind or a rain, extreme cold or extreme heat, I am aching all over and the pain is so unbearable that I wanted to commit suicide. That old thief indeed inflicted much suffering to me.”

“It can’t be treated?” Kou Zhong asked.

Xiang Yushan sighed. “I lost track how many people have examined me, final verdict was unless someone with both extreme heat and extreme cold innate qi helping me unblocking my eight extraordinary channels, it would be difficult for me to recover.”

Kou Zhong’s heart was moved, “Can two people do it?” he asked.

“Not impossible,” Xiang Yushan replied, “But to succeed, both cold and heat must be of common origin. Ay! Ordinarily, when people cultivate internal energy, they would lean to either hot or cold. The most appalling thing is that these two aspects must be innate qi. Martial art master who has this kind of innate qi, to find one is already very difficult, much less someone who simultaneously has both hot and cold qi? I have already given up early on!”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other; and then both of them burst out laughing at the same time, “Kid!” they said, “You are saved!”

By daybreak the next morning, the ship sailed past Chen Liu. Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling, Susu and Xiang Yushan, four people were having breakfast inside the cabin. Susu said in amazement, "Xiang Gongzi must have had a very good sleep last night, you look a lot more spirited!"

Xiang Yushan excitedly said, "It has nothing to do with me sleeping well, but the chronic ailment that has been plaguing me for the last two years has been cured half by the two Dage last night. One more night and then I will be completely recovered. Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong have become like my second parents."

Kou Zhong was still alive, but he had no spirit, "Not only I am not your parents, I am not your, this old kid's Dage. You are merely counting your chicken before they are hatched, just one night and I am so exhausted that I feel like I am dying, and you want me to do it again tonight?"

Xu Ziling still had lingering fears as well, "Turns out Xiang Xiong's injury is so severe; I will need at least two days of rest before I could continue."

After asking what had happened, Susu said, "If you want to save someone, you have to save him to the end! Today you ought to sit in meditation to cultivate your internal energy, once your spirit is restored, you ought to send streams of qi to cure Xiang Gongzi's injury."

Xiang Yushan was both grateful and apologetic; he said, "You should take two-day rest."

Kou Zhong was unhappy, "We'll see about that!" he snapped, "Right! Last night I forgot to ask you why the battle between Dugu Clan and Yuwen Clan is so fierce. Logically, since Yang Guang's birth mother was from the Dugu Clan, compared to the Yuwen Clan, they have a lot closer relationship with the imperial household, why would they let Yuwen Clan gain an upper hand?"

"It's a long story [orig. as long as a bolt of cloth]," Xiang Yushan respectfully replied, "All Yang Jian's [first emperor of Sui (541-604), reigned 581-604] five sons were born of the Empress from Dugu Clan. At that time Yang Jian was

immeasurably content, thinking that since they were blood brothers who shared the same mother, there would not be any strive over power or battle over the throne. Who would have thought that Lao'er [second son] Yang Guang would murder his father and brothers in cold blood? Not only that, he also raped Yang Jian's beloved imperial concubine Madame Chen, and promiscuously slept around women's apartment at the palace. Dugu Clan people have the most detailed knowledge about these matters; therefore, Yang Guang is extremely wary of them. For that reason he turned to the Yuwen Clan and trained them to control the Dugu Clan. Naturally there are a lot of others details in this matter that outsiders are not supposed to know, and thus I am not clear on it myself!"

Xu Ziling asked, "Right now, who is from the Dugu Clan serving as a government official in the imperial court?"

Xiang Yushan replied, "The one most trusted by Yang Guang is actually the second figure of the Dugu Clan, Dugu Sheng. He is Yang Guang's personal bodyguard; wherever Yang Guang is, he will also be there."

Kou Zhong seized this opportunity to ask, "How's this person's martial art skill compared to Dugu Ba?"

"Speaking about martial art skill," Xiang Yushan replied, "Naturally You Chuhong ranks first. Compared to her Clan Leader son Dugu Feng, she is still far more superior. After these two are Dugu Sheng and Dugu Ba. In my opinion, Dugu Sheng is a bit more experienced and careful than Dugu Ba."

"Nowadays, are there other people who are close to Yang Guang?" Xu Ziling asked.

Xiang Yushan replied, "These days, the most popular two people by Yang Guang's side are the Interior Minister Yu Shiji and Imperial Censor Fei Yun, two crafty and fawning vile characters. What Yang Guang likes the most about them is that they report only the good news, not the bad news, by blocking all documents and reports of urgent matters and emergencies from reaching him."

Xiang Yushan sighed and went on, "This time Yang Guang flees to Jiangdu. From the up to 150,000 soldiers and generals who came with him, other than

handing down imperial edict to indict people to get their money as their only morale booster, they cannot do anything. It's a pity that he is still as licentious as before, becoming someone who refuses to face reality, which is really hard for us to understand."

"Yu Shiji and Fei Yun must be civil officials," Kou Zhong said, "What about other people? Is there anybody with strong martial art skill?"

Xiang Yushan replied, "Dugu Clan has Dugu Sheng, which I have just mentioned. Yuwen Clan has Yuwen Huaji and Yuwen Shiji, two brothers. And then there is the Imperial Guard Commanding Officer Sima Dekan, a martial art master who is equally famous to Wang Shiyun, who, for the time being, is stationed in Luoyang. Were it not for these four men, that muddleheaded ruler Yang Guang would have been assassinated early on."

"There is one thing we don't understand," Xu Ziling said, "On the surface, they still maintain a good relationship with Baling Bang; why did as a member of the royal household the 'Shadow Assassin' Yang Xuyan obey Yuwen Clan's order to assassinate your precious gang's Bangzhu?"

Xiang Yushan sighed. He said, "Not to conceal anything from you, but in the struggle between the Dugu and Yuwen Clans, our late Bangzhu was leaning toward the Dugu Clan, hence he earned the hatred of the Yuwen Clan and was thus eradicated."

Kou Zhong was even more confused; frowning, he asked, "But how did Yang Xuyan involve himself in this struggle?"

"Until today, the reason Yang Xuyan aligned himself with the Yuwen Clan remains a mystery," Xiang Yushan explained, "But according to our secret information, Yang Guang was kept in the dark concerning Yang Xuyan's assassination of our late Bangzhu; which is definitely thought-provoking."

Susu said, "When we get to Yangzhou, what exactly can Xiao Zhong and Xiao Ling do to help you to deal with the Yuwen Clan?"

Xiang Yushan's spirit rose. "Good question," he said, "I will make arrangement

for Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong to see that muddleheaded ruler.”

The three were shocked. “What?!?” their voice cracked.

Big Sister Xiao’s laughter came from the cabin’s door, “That is the most brilliant deployment,” she said.

Like a wisp of smoke, this charming beauty whose looseness penetrated the bones, sauntered lithely into the cabin, carrying with her a whiff of fragrance. Stopping behind Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, she intimately reached out and put her hands on the two boys’ shoulders. Bending over, she laughed next to the two boys’ ears and said, “Right now Yuwen Huaji put the blame on the ‘Secret to Long Life’ affair entirely on the two gentlemen. We might as well beat them at their own game by the two gentlemen personally present a memorial to that muddleheaded ruler that Yuwen Huaji had hidden the ‘Secret to Long Life’ for personal gain. With the account book on top of that, it would be strange indeed if the muddleheaded ruler did not suspect the Yuwen Clan.”

Kou Zhong exhaled a mouthful of cold air, “Yang Guang is well-known for committing murder without blinking an eye; what if something goes wrong and he get rid of the two of us immediately?”

Xu Ziling added, “We must never let that fatuous ruler to see Su Jie; otherwise the outcome will be difficult to predict.”

Xiang Yushan hastily said, “Gentlemen, please be assured that we have prepared a meticulous plan; from the two imperial concubines Yang Guang most doted on, Zhu Fei [fei means imperial concubine] is our people. She has already sweet talk Yang Guang [orig. pouring confusing soup], indicating that there is another story within the ‘Secret to Long Life’ matter; as a result, now the muddleheaded ruler has issued an imperial decree to summon the two of you, because he wants to find out the facts. Nothing ventured, nothing gain [orig. how do you catch the tiger cub without entering the tiger’s lair?], the risk is worth it.”

Big Sister Shaw took her hands off the two boys and sat on Kou Zhong’s left; she cheerfully said, “With Dugu Sheng speaking up by your side, how could Yang

Guang not believe you? I can guarantee that there won't be any surprise and danger to the two Gongzi."

"But our relationship with the Dugu Clan is not so good," Kou Zhong stammered, "Just a few days ago Xiao Ling injured Dugu Ba due to ambush."

Xiang Yushan and Big Sister Xiao stared at Xu Ziling with that 'hard to believe' expression on their faces, so Xu Ziling told them what happened.

"That should be no problem," Big Sister Xiao said, "Besides, Dugu Ba won't be in Yangzhou very soon. Even if he were, with them facing a powerful enemy, who would be foolish enough to bother about personal gratitude and grudges?"

Xu Ziling's scalp went numb as he said, "After we enter the Palace, won't we lose our freedom?"

Xiang Yushan said, "Gentlemen are not thinking of going everywhere, are you?"

Big Sister Xiao said, "It depends on the development of the situation. We have had a discussion with Dugu Sheng before, in the future he might pretend that he loves talent and takes you as his disciples in Yang Guang's present. After two Gongzi obtain some status, the situation will be utterly different!"

Kou Zhong nodded; he said, "Turns out this mission is rather fascinating. This time we will definitely have Yuwen Huaji bag his food and leave before he finish eating."

Susu anxiously said, "But that muddleheaded ruler is so temperamental; are you sure it's going to be okay?"

"Nobody knows that muddleheaded ruler's character better than Zhu Guifei [imperial consort]," Xiang Yushan said, "That's why she has prepared a bunch of arguments that Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong could deliver to the muddleheaded ruler. As long as you could cajole him that he is in a good mood, he might even bestow you official position to do part-time job. Miss Susu please set your heart

at ease.”

Kou Zhong glowered at him for a moment and said, “No wonder you, this fellow, are so insistent in cooperating with us; turns out you already prepared this scheme.”

Xiang Yushan protested for the injustice, “Gentlemen are my great benefactors who are like a second parent to me; how could I harm you? If any calamity befalls you, I, Xiang Yushan, will commit suicide to apologize to you. Let the Heaven be my witness in this matter, if I ever renege my promise, let me not have a good end.”

By this time Big Sister Xiao has already noticed the vast improvement in Xiang Yushan’s countenance. After some inquiries she found out what happened; she was astonished. “Secret to Long Life is indeed a rare martial art manual, this is really unbelievable.”

Kou Zhong was wary. “Is Dajie being tempted by the ‘Secret to Long Life’?” he asked.

Big Sister Xiao was cross, “Unless I am willing to discard the martial art I already trained, even if I obtain the ‘Secret to Long Life’, what good will it bring? Training randomly will only cause fire deviation. You look down on me like that, I demand an apology.”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “I was just blurting out without thinking, why would Dajie take it seriously? You want apology, then I apologize.”

Big Sister Xiao cast him a sidelong glance filled with ten thousand amorous feelings; she cursed in low voice, “Truly without half a shred of conscience; I wonder how many poor girls will be swindled by you in the future.”

After eating and drinking to his heart’s content, Xu Ziling stood up to excuse himself, “Just continue your chat! Last night I did not sleep a wink, I want to go back to bed and sleep.”

Kou Zhong seized this opportunity to leave the banquet table. After excusing himself, he followed Xu Ziling going back to their room.

Along the way, Kou Zhong said, "One mistake from us, we will become the chess piece of Baling Bang and the Dugu Clan's effort to frame the Yuwen Clan. Even though we will also benefit from it, but whether it will be a blessing or a curse, it is still difficult to predict."

Xu Ziling said, "How are we going to take Su Jie with us? Particularly that muddleheaded ruler must not see her; otherwise, if something went wrong, we can't even slip away. Baling Bang people must agree to this first."

Kou Zhong said, "Right now it's they who came to ask for our help, how could they not agree? After Xiang kid's countenance improves, he appears a lot healthier. Yin Gui Pai's martial art is really heretical, unexpectedly it could make people appear to be completely under evil influence."

By this time they were stepping into the corridor leading to their rooms; suddenly they heard creaking noise, as if someone was opening and closing the door to one of the sleeping compartments, and slipped inside.

The two boys exchanged glances; they both felt something was amiss.

Kou Zhong whispered, "Let's see who it is."

Xu Ziling quickly walked over to the door, raised his hand to knock and said, "We saw you! Quickly open the door!"

Actually, he did not see anybody, but since that person hid like that, he must be someone that they knew, so Xu Ziling was bluffing to swindle the opponent.

The room was quiet. Only after a long time did the cabin door finally creaking open.

Both parties were coming face-to-face, and the two boys cried out in surprise.

The person inside the room was surprisingly the Beautiful Shifu who taught them the Bird Crossing Technique, Yun Yuzhen.

This beauty looked a bit thinner, but her smile was still coy, her attractive bearing was even better than ever. This moment, with a smile that was as beautiful as a flower, she looked at the two boys up and down; her beautiful eyes lit up as she said, “My two good disciples finally grew up to be adults. Looking at your imposing, formidable appearance, your master is very pleased.”

Suddenly the two boys realized that they were at a loss.

Kou Zhong was the first to recover; giggling, he said, “Where in the world would you find a master who is afraid to see his disciples? Even rarer, where could you find a Shifu who harms his disciples?”

And then, craning out his neck to look inside the room, he pretended to be astonished as he said, “Why can’t I see Shifu’s boyfriend Dugu Ce?”

Yun Yuzhen sighed and said, “Just consider your Shifu is wrong! Afterwards I regretted it so much that I wanted to kill myself, plus because I thought that you were buried at the bottom of the cliff, I cried for so many days; can you not settle old scores with me?”

Xu Ziling said, “Then why were you being evasive just now?”

Yun Yuzhen reached out to grab the two boys’ hands and dragged them inside. After shutting the door, she leaned against the door and closed her eyes. “Because of guilty conscience, naturally I did not dare to face you!” she said softly, “But now that we are good, there is no need to hide anymore.”

The two boys had no way of pressing her. Kou Zhong said, “Let bygone be bygone. What kind of game are you playing now?”

Xu Ziling angrily said, “That Xiang kid has the cheek to hide you from us, I am going to break our partnership right away!”

Yun Yuzhen opened her beautiful eyes; she said with a wry smile, “Don’t blame Xiang Gongzi, it was me who asked him to keep this matter a secret. Just now I wanted to slip out to see you, but when I heard your footsteps, for some reason I sneaked back into my room.”

Kou Zhong spread out his arms and said, “All right! You are our Beautiful Shifu after all, past events can be disregarded, just one kiss and we’ll call it even.”

Yun Yuzhen’s almond eyes grew big. “What did you say?” she angrily said, “How can a disciple kiss his master?”

Kou Zhong put an act by pulling up his sleeves; striding over, he said, “You think you are our real Shifu? It was just a nickname we, two brothers, gave you.”

Yun Yuzhen recovered her countenance; smiling coquettishly, she said, “You want a kiss, then so be it! Good disciple, you think your Shifu is afraid of you?” Spreading her jade arms wide, she was ready to take Kou Zhong into her fragrant embrace.

Now it was Kou Zhong’s turn to be so scared that he took several steps back. With a charming laugh Yun Yuzhen opened the door and slipped out.

The two boys looked at each other, and then they both roared in laughter together.

Unexpectedly life could be so much fun.

Book 6 Chapter 1 – Duke Of Pushan's Decree

There was a knock on the door. Xu Ziling, who was sitting in meditation on the bed, opened his eyes and called out, "Who is it?"

Kou Zhong pushed the door with hand and foot, and slipped inside. After closing the door, he still put his ear on the door to listen intently for quite a while before breathed a sigh of relief and walked over to sit on the bed. "I have just scouted the situation in the enemy camp," he said proudly.

Xu Ziling was bewildered, "What enemy?" he asked.

Kou Zhong excitedly said, "For us, there are only two kinds of people in the world; those we know, and those we don't know. From those that we know, we can further divide into two categories: friends or enemy. Anybody who is not our friend ought to be categorized as our enemy. Do you think Yiqi Shan [referring to Xiang Yushan, see Book 3 Chapter 7] is our friend or not? Is Beautiful Shifu our friend? Of course not! Therefore, before it is crystal clear to us, they ought to be regarded as the enemies. Ergo, why can't I say that scouting their situation is scouting the situation in the enemy camp?"

Xu Ziling nearly burst out laughing. Painstakingly keeping a straight face, he said, "You either took the wrong medicine, or have gone insane. You were simply eavesdropping other people talking and already so excited that you talk without rhyme or reason."

And then, he lightly patted Kou Zhong shoulder and lowered his voice, "What did you hear? F@rt it out! See if it worth my consideration."

Kou Zhong giggled mysteriously and said, "I heard the sound of a female enemy panting."

Xu Ziling scratched his head, "Female enemy panting?" he asked, "Is it Yun Yuzhen or Xiao Dajie? Those two appear to be the kind of women who love to pant."

Kou Zhong slapped a thigh and cheered, but it was Xu Ziling's thigh. Roaring in laughter he swayed back and forth and said, "Women who love to pant, that's a good one. Only a lecher who's disguised as an upright gentleman like you could come out with that, making those who hear it could not refrain from having a 'fleeting cloud, pouring rain' kind of reverie."

Xu Ziling knitted his scimitar-shaped eyebrows as he rubbed the sore thigh Kou Zhong slapped. "This time this kid has really gone mad," he muttered under his breath.

Kou Zhong scooted over that they were now sitting side by side. Wrapping his arm around Xu Ziling's shoulder, he said, "Just now I touched Beautiful Shifu."

Xu Ziling was visibly shaken, "What did you touch?" he asked.

Kou Zhong boldly said, "Her slender lily-white hand."

Xu Ziling scoffed, "And I thought it was someplace important. When she taught us the Bird-Crossing Technique, didn't she also touch my hand? Earlier she was letting you to kiss her, why did you run away in panic?"

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "This is called now is now, then is then. This time it was this Shaoye who made the move, so it's a different matter altogether. After I touched her, she acted as if nothing had happened and went into hiding in her room, but when I focused my power to my ears, immediately I was able to hear that this female enemy unexpectedly was leaning against the door and panting. Obviously my sex appeal to her is just too strong."

Xu Ziling was angry, "Sex appeal your granny!" he cursed, "Could this woman

be a good person? The lesson you learned from Li Xiuning is not enough? Right now we are going to avenge Niang ...”

Smiling mischievously Kou Zhong slapped his back and said, “No need to get angry. This Shaoye won’t blame you for being shortsighted, because you didn’t know that moving troops with chat and laughter is the highest realm of the military tactic. What’s not good about bad woman? At least she has ample experience in that kind of thing that she will be able to give guidance to the upstart boys. That was the reason why I gave her the nickname Beautiful Shifu, so you see, I already had the foresight.”

But then he sighed and went on, “Actually, I was not happy because of her reaction, but I was happy for us, two brothers. Thinking about the first time we came across her, we were still frustrated and feeling inferior, but now not only I can touch her without getting scolded, I can also make her feel that I am a man qualified to touch her. Hence it is clear that we have earned our place in Jianghu.”

Xu Ziling muttered irresolutely, “You remind me of an immeasurably self-satisfied newly rich, or perhaps a snob who seeks governmental position and riches by hook or by crook.”

Kou Zhong forcefully slapped Xu Ziling’s shoulder; he was in complete agreement, “This four-character saying ‘by hook or by crook’ [Translator’s note: most Chinese sayings/idiom have four characters] is very true. If not ‘by hook or by crook’, if it was ‘with hands and feet tied’, then there won’t be enough people fighting. Because Li Mi understood ‘by hook or by crook’, he became the Big Boss of the Wagang Army. Of course! My ‘by hook or by crook’ is only directed toward the enemy.”

Xu Ziling sneered. “I am sorry,” he said, “My understanding of this four-character mantra is a bit different from Zhong Shao’s. If we are talking about a friend, there won’t be any ‘by hook or by crook’! Not only Zhai Rang was Li Mi’s superior, he was his comrade-in-arms and benefactor. Now that’s what I call by ‘hook or by crook’.”

With a wry smile Kou Zhong said, “The main reason you are mad at me is because I am colluding with the female enemy. Ay! One lifetime two brothers, I’ll

do whatever you think is good! Worst-case scenario Xiaodi [I, little brother] will have to find another Beautiful Shifu inside the women apartment at the Tian Xiang Lou [heavenly fragrance building], Miss Yu Ling. I hope my foresight is a bit keener this time.”

Xu Ziling punched Kou Zhong’s thigh; he laughed and said, “You just want to make me laugh.”

Kou Zhong sighed; he said, “In this world, there is nothing that I, Kou Zhong, fear. The only thing I am afraid of is seeing Ling Shaoye get angry and refuse to laugh. Hey! I have always wanted to ask you this: do you think Li Dage can be considered our brother?”

Xu Ziling was taken aback, “I have never thought about it,” he said, “Why do you ask?”

Kou Zhong replied in a heavy voice, “We knew Su Jie at least one or two sichen [1 sichen = 2 hours] earlier than we knew Li Dage, hence we ought to be a bit closer to Su Jie. Given that Su Jie is such a good woman yet Li Jing did not know how to cherish and take a good care of her, I felt very uncomfortable.”

Xu Ziling was about to reply when Big Sister Xiao, whose looseness penetrated the bones, called them out, “Come to the main cabin, there’s an important think we need to tell you!”

In the main cabin, everybody was sitting around the table. Other than Big Sister Xiao, Xiang Yushan and Susu, Yun Yuzhen also joined for the first time.

Xiang Yushan and Susu sat together; from time to time four eyes met in such an intimate manner.

Big Sister Xiao spoke up seriously, “Just received the latest news: Li Mi claimed that you killed his trusted lieutenant the ‘Flying Feather’ Zheng Rong, as a result, he issued the ‘Duke of Pushan’s Decree’, vowing to cut off your heads. Whoever can capture you alive will not only receive a thousand taels of gold, but will also become his Junshi [military counselor, just like Shen Luoyan]. Whoever can present your heads to him will not only receive reward, but will also be promoted

to be his great general.”

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong looked at each other in dismay. Zheng Rong was killed by Liu Heita, yet the blame was put on their heads; in the end, it was just an excuse to kill them.

The person Susu feared the most was Li Mi; her countenance changed. “What should we do?” she asked.

With a cold laugh Kou Zhong said, “I am not afraid of him! He did not know how lucky he is I did not come to settle the debt with him, now he is taking advantage of us by putting the blame on us, two brothers.”

“Kou Xiong, please do not get angry,” Xiang Yushan hastily said, “Right now Li Mi’s fame and power covers the world, drawing the hearts of millions of people. Since he blatantly issued a decree to kill you, it is clear that he will spare no effort to deal with you. After Yangzhou mission is completed, Xiaodi can make arrangement to have two Dage to lie low until the fuss dies down; you must never let your emotion affect your decision.”

Big Sister Xiao added, “Right now Li Mi has the greatest chance to become the Emperor, plus he knows to buy the hearts of the people; hence all the heroes of the world are looking up to him for leadership. Since he is offering heavy rewards, there must be a lot of people who will blindly follow him and give you trouble. Only an outstanding talent can recognize current trends; you hide for a while, nobody will dare to say that you are cowards.”

Looking at their hard-to-appease anger, Yun Yuzhen, who was rather familiar with their character, said, “Li Mi issuing the ‘Duke of Pushan’s Decree’ is really unwise, because you are alive and well a day longer, he could not get out of it a day longer too. The further it drags along, the heavier the damage to his reputation will be. It would be best if the two of you make appearances here and there from time to time; he will be like riding a tiger and cannot get off.”

Her remark was very effective. Kou Zhong immediately nodded and said, “All right! He wants to drive us away, we swear to fight him to the end, so that he will find it hard to sleep, and he will eat without tasting the food.”

Xiang Yushan laughed and said, "And plus two Dage's reputation will be flourishing even more. Even now there are people who place you on par with people like Ba Fenghan, Yang Xuyan, the 'Passionate Prince' Hou Xibai and the others. They believe that outside the Four Powerful Clans, you are the most prominent rising stars."

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted, "Where did Xiang Xiaoge [little big brother] hear it from?" he asked, "Did you disembark and listen to other people's talk?"

"Xiao Zhong!" Susu scolded him, "Can you watch your mouth?"

Xu Ziling sighed and said, "This kid is too excited today."

Kou Zhong shot a sidelong glance toward Yun Yuzhen; he said with a chuckle, "Beautiful Shifu is very good to us, naturally her disciples are particularly happy."

Yun Yuzhen's pretty face blush a little; she glowered at him in return.

Big Sister Xiao said, "While we have time, let's eat dinner first, and then we can discuss how we are going to deal with that muddleheaded ruler!"

Changing the topic, Kou Zhong asked, "What kind of person is Hou Xibai anyway? How come his nickname is so weird?"

Xiang Yushan laughed, "If you want to know clearly, you ought to ask Yun Bangzhu," he said, "She has met Hou Xibai."

A complicated look flitted across Yun Yuzhen elegant eyes; she said softly, "I don't want to talk about this person."

Big Sister Xiao let out a cold snort, "What 'passionate'?" she said, "Just being lenient everywhere, that's all! Funny thing is that he loves to seduce women. In fact, no one has ever heard him having a good relationship with women. This man's background is more mysterious than Yang Xuyan and Ba Fenghan."

Going back to the topic at hand, she turned to Kou Zhong with slight edge on her voice, "Can we talk about proper business now?"

Xu Ziling answered for him, "Xiao Dajie, please speak."

Big Sister Xiao cast Kou Zhong a sidelong glance; smiling mischievously, she said, "To convince Yang Guang, first of all, you have to fit his fancy; report only the good news, not the bad news."

Xiang Yushan joined in, "Yang Guang's mood is extremely unstable, from time to time he wakes up from a dream, shouting and screaming about ghosts who died of injustice demanding his life. Even when he is laughing and looks so happy, he must not be provoked at all. If his underlings said something untoward and he happened to hear it, light punishment will be flogging, heavy punishment will be beheading. Therefore, everybody has to follow his tone and likes and dislikes in their talk."

Susu asked, "How's his martial art skill? Is he formidable?"

Yun Yuzhen laughed and said, "His martial art came from Yang Jian, naturally he has some real skill. However, after wine and women nibbled away at his body and mind for so many years, how much weight left is kind of hard to say."

Big Sister Xiao also coached the two boys on the court etiquette, and how to curry favor with Yang Guang. She stopped only when the maids came in bringing meat dishes for their dinner.

The overwhelmed Kou Zhong said, "This muddleheaded ruler is really difficult to serve."

Susu reminded him, "Helping people must be through the end, later you must remember to do your best in treating Xiang Gongzi of his former ailment."

Kou Zhong was actually unwilling, but he was helpless to refuse.

On the other hand, Xu Ziling readily agreed.

Xiang Yushan expressed ten thousand thanks for a thousand kindnesses.

When the two boys finally took a walk on the cabin deck, Kou Zhong blamed Xu Ziling, “How could you agree so readily? I was thinking of dragging this matter with that Xiang kid as long as possible, to teach him a lesson that he should not carelessly take any rash action.”

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “I only do that for Su Jie.”

Kou Zhong was still resentful about it, “Can’t you see that that kid deliberately courting Su Jie only because he wants us to heal his injury?”

Xu Ziling reached out the bow of the ship, he grabbed the railing’s horizontal pole and breathed deeply of the ice-cold air of the river breeze. He said in heavy voice, “If in the future Xiang Yushan dare to turn his back on Su Jie, I, Xu Ziling will be the first not to let him off.”

Seeing how resolute and decisive [orig. chop the nail and slice the iron] Xu Ziling was, Kou Zhong knew that there was no room for discussion in this matter. Changing the subject, he said, “How do you think we should deal with that dog thief Li Mi?”

Xu Ziling said, “Unless you have a magnificent army with thousands of men and horses, what can you do? Just Wang Bodang that lowly man we are already unable to deal with him, much less Li Mi?”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “What you said is in deep agreement with my thinking; right now he is forcing us to our head, therefore, we must establish our own troops, must make a supreme effort to recruit soldiers and buy horses. Just like everything else, without money nothing can be done. I am thinking that before we get the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’, we need to borrow money from the Xiang kid. After we get money, naturally doing things will be easier.”

Xu Ziling was shocked. “It is for Niang’s sake that we are doing this; how could we want other people’s money?”

Kou Zhong felt snubbed big time; with a wry smile he said, “Ay! How come nowadays every time I came up with any plan you always disagree?”

Xu Ziling reached out to wrap his arm around Kou Zhong’s shoulder; he said, “If we want to earn money, we have to earn it using our pair of hands. Since temporarily we need to go into hiding, we might as well hide at the ‘training beach’, take that batch of salt out, transport it to the northwest and gain great wealth. After we have the money, we can buy a large house to be our base of operations. At that time, you could shut the gate, declare yourself a king or proclaim yourself a hegemon or whatever you want.”

Kou Zhong’s eyes lit up immediately; he excitedly said, “We’d better do it sooner rather than later. Taking advantage while the Ol’ Die is cutting off the Song Clan’s livelihood and the price of salt is skyrocketing, we will make a good fortune. Ha! This time we will succeed!”

Footsteps were heard from behind, Susu was coming. Squeezing herself between the two boys, she wrapped her arms around the boys’ waists, and said in a low voice, “Are you angry at Jiejie?”

Kou Zhong was puzzled, “Angry at Jiejie for what?” he asked.

Susu hung her head low and said, “Angry at Jiejie for forcing you to treat Xiang Gongzi’s illness. Ay! His character is not as bad as you think. He even told me about cricket fight he used to do when he was young. I did not know cricket has intelligence!”

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong exchanged a glance; the former seized this opportunity to ask, “Does Jiejie like him?”

Susu was blushing so deep that even her ears were red; greatly displeased and annoyed, she said, “I only get along well with him! Jiejie has already said I won’t marry!”

Suddenly Kou Zhong was severely shaken, “Disaster!” he exclaimed.

Xu Ziling and Susu followed his gaze and saw under the moonlight, on the river ahead, two big ships sailed speedily like torrential rush, from the tributary, blocking their way.

Alarm sounded on their ship, Xiang Yushan, Yun Yuzhen, Big Sister Xiao, and about a dozen Baling Bang martial art masters rushed out. When they got to the three people's side, they looked suspiciously to the two big ships, which were gradually getting closer.

Frowning, Xiang Yushan said, "They are Li Zitong's ships. If this time he is personally coming, we will be in big trouble."

Kou Zhong sneered and said, "Isn't Xiang Gongzi getting on very well with people from both the black and white ways?"

"Xiao Zhong!" Susu scolded him, "At this moment you still say such thing?"

Xiang Yushan smiled wryly and said, "Whenever it involves the struggle over the world, there is no favor between sons and fathers, to say nothing of our Baling Bang has had no dealings with Li Zitong before."

Xu Ziling said, "We have also heard about this man, but we don't know enough details."

Yun Yuzhen said, "Li Zitong is a hegemon of the Eastern Sea, a vicious and merciless man. At first he was the leader of the uprising at Changbai Mountain; after crossing the Huai River, he supported Du Fuwei as the leader. Later on for some unknown reason he had a fall out with Du Fuwei; leading his own troops he occupied Haling and called himself the Commander-in-Chief, his fame and power is extremely flourishing."

Big Sister Xiao added, "His 'bamboo joint copper whip' is shaped like a long stick, it ranks among the 'amazing skill incredible art', it can be flexible it can be stiff, its specialty is to break the inner power and true qi of the opponent; very formidable."

And then she continued softly, “Two Gongzi and Miss Susu better avoid it in the cabin, let us deal with them.”

Kou Zhong swept his gaze around; seeing all of the Baling Bang masters on the ship were waiting in tight formation, his heroic spirit was aroused at once. “So much avoidance already,” he said, “Can I borrow a saber or something? Xiao Ling will be in charge of protecting Su Jie.”

One of Xiang Yushan’s subordinate respectfully asked, “What kind of weapon does Xu Ye want?”

Xu Ziling shook his head, “I don’t need weapon,” he said.

The man was startled, and then he simply left.

Yun Yuzhen asked in astonishment, “Xiao Ling don’t use weapon?”

Xu Ziling did not have the least bit of good opinion on her, he coldly said, “My hands are my weapon.”

Meanwhile the incoming ships were only about ten zhang away from them. The opposite party flashed them a signal, requesting them to lower the sail and stop the ship.

They saw the two ships’ deck, as well as the viewing platform, were densely packed with people; it was indeed an impressive show of force that intimidated the people’s heart.

Their ship was actually half size bigger than the opposite party’s, but it was design mostly to ferry goods. In battle, not only it would not win against the nimble enemy’s warships, it would also become a prominent target for fiery arrows and sling stones attack, because the bigger the ship, the more difficult it was to protect.

The situation right now was that although the opponent was strong, but to

easily give in and surrender would also seem to be unwise.

Xiang Yushan muttered, “I did not expect Li Zitong’s influence would reach to this place.” And then, waving his hand, he gave his order, “Prepare to break a siege!”

Baling Bang people acknowledged the order loudly.

Suddenly a cold snort, which actually rose above the hundred or so people’s voice shouting their acknowledgement, was heard from the enemy’s ship, followed by a one hundred percent bold male voice, “Excuse me, may I ask if the Er Dangjia Xiao Xian Xiong [second master, see Book 4 Chapter 9] is on board, presiding over the current situation?”

Big Sister Xiao laughed tenderly and responded, “Turns out it is indeed Li Longtou [lit. dragon head, *i.e.* big boss] himself who is coming to visit; Xiao Huan pays her respect!”

When everybody heard that it was indeed Li Zitong himself, they all groaned in their hearts.

Li Zitong laughed aloud and said, “Turns out it is the ‘Coquettish Lady’ Xiao Dajie. Looking at your esteemed brother’s face, this time the Ol’ Li will act according to Jianghu rules; everybody please stay where you are.”

Xiang Yushan knew that he was going to come; hastily he ordered his men not to act.

Before he even finished speaking, a man in white already soared from the deck of the enemy ship, across about a dozen zhang of empty space between the ships, and landed steadily on the bow of their ship.

Composing themselves, they saw that this Li Zitong was about thirty-five or thirty-six years old, his appearance was rather handsome and majestic. However, the hair on his temples was frosty white. His white clothes fluttered under the caressing of the river breeze, giving a bit of impression that he was a confident

and at ease, someone who was above the dust of the earth. The only defect would be his eyes, which were thin and long, so that it felt out of proportion, something that did not match the perfect outline of his face.

They did not expect Li Zitong to be this refined and graceful, so every felt a bit surprised.

Li Zitong stood with hands behind his back, his bright and glistening eyes slowly swept across everybody's face. Finally he stopped at Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong's faces. Acting as though there were nobody else present, he said, "I want the two of you to follow the Ol' Li obediently! I guarantee glory, splendor, wealth and rank, as well as endless benefit for you."

Meanwhile the enemy's two ships turned around nimbly. One in front the other at the rear, they sandwiched the big ship in the middle.

Yun Yuzhen saluted and said, "Jukun Bang's Yun Yuzhen pays her respect to General Li; I was wondering ..."

Li Zitong cut her off offhandedly, "Turns out it is Yun Bangzhu. Unexpectedly you look this beautiful; no wonder there are so many heroes of Jianghu are infatuated with you."

On the surface he was putting it nicely, but it was actually a very mean remark; he was implying that Yun Yuzhen was a very loose woman. Other than being extremely rude, he was also making it very clear that he did not have any regards toward Jukun Bang. Of course everybody's countenance changed.

Yun Yuzhen's pretty face turned cold; she was about to flare out when Xiang Yushan took a step forward in front of her and said, "Wanbei [younger generation] Xiang yushan, my humble father is Xiang Gui. May I ask what kind of task General Li has for these two brothers of mine?"

Li Zitong cast a disdainful glance toward Xiang Yushan; with a mocking tone he said, "I don't care if your father is here; would the Ol' Li take any instruction from him?"

Kou Zhong signaled Xu Ziling with his eyes; he shouted, “I don’t care if you are Li Zitong of Li Butong [butong means ‘don’t understand/does not make sense’], if you want us to obey your orders, you will have to show us a bit of your real skill; would we, two brothers, be afraid of anybody?”

Seeing Kou Zhong playing a joke on his name, surprisingly Li Zitong did not feel it to be disrespectful at all; he laughed aloud and said, “Young upstart hero, no wonder Old Du also viewed you in a new light. Let us make a bet, as long as within a hundred moves I can beat the two of you together, both of you must obediently follow me, and listen to everything Ol’ Li orders you to do.”

Kou Zhong took the steel saber that was handed over to him; he strode out and said with a cold laugh, “What if you cannot force us? I definitely don’t want to follow you by your side like a dog!”

Li Zitong finally could not take it anymore, his eyes flashed a murderous look, he swiftly moved forward.

Kou Zhong stayed calm without showing any fear, his saber also moved swiftly to hack.

Book 6 Chapter 2 – Old Cat Burning Its Whiskers

Everyone, excluding Susu and Xu Ziling, had never imagine that even toward such a powerful hegemon like Li Zitong, Kou Zhong would still be this brave. They wanted to stop him, but it was already too late.

Li Zitong smirked inwardly. It should be noted that although nobody knew who started it, but the fact that Kou and Xu, two boys, joining hands in defeating Yuwen Wudi has been spread all over the world. Although upon self-reflection Li Zitong knew his martial art skill was above Yuwen Wudi's, how could he not have some misgivings? However, seeing Kou Zhong attacked alone, he reckoned that as long as he could put this kid under control, the other kid would be captured obediently.

Right this moment, a skin-piercing, bone-penetrating saber qi blasted directly toward his face.

Kou Zhong completely ignored Li Zitong's long sleeves, which were brushing toward the eardrum acupoints on both sides of his head. Focusing solely on the opponent's face, like a lightning bolt his saber struck down. It was a simple, straightforward, but also swift and fierce without equal.

Watching Kou Zhong's saber strike, unexpectedly a feeling of dread and astonishment grew in the hearts of the crowd of people on the ship standing silently in circle to watch.

Li Zitong's reputation was built not just in name only, but also in reality; in all his life, among the hundreds and thousands battles, there was no swift and

fierce saber strike he had not seen, yet this single saber strike from Kou Zhong seemed to be able to tightly lock his state of mind, giving him a feeling like he could not unleash his ferociousness.

He was a great master of martial art; as soon as that feeling came, he immediately understood the reason. At the same time his heart shivered in fear, because he knew that unexpectedly Kou Zhong was able to merge the mind, qi and spirit [three energies of Chinese medicine] into one entity, blending it into his saber technique. Only someone who has reached excellent innate saber qi realm would be able to produce this kind of astonishing power.

Immediately he let out a cold snort and no longer dared to be careless, withdrew his sleeves, swiftly raised a mouthful of true qi, and threw his head backward as his body spun rapidly.

Plainly Kou Zhong's saber was about to hit, but Li Zitong suddenly circled around to his left side, while stretching out his right hand to knock Kou Zhong's wrist. The style was exquisite beyond compare.

Seeing Kou Zhong was able to force Li Zitong to change his move in meeting the enemy, everybody could not help cheering in unison.

Susu pushed Xu Ziling forward and said in a trembling voice, "Why haven't you helped Xiao Zhong?"

A thread of smiling expression escaped from the corners of Xu Ziling's mouth; he took three steps forward and stood guard at the perimeter of the fight.

Kou Zhong stayed calm without any trace of fear, his left hand launched the 'Meridian-severing technique' taught by Tu Shufang, using his fingers as a saber to sweep aside Li Zitong's eagle claw.

'Bang!'

Without anything fancy, without any trick, the two exchanged a move.

Kou Zhong let out a stifled grunt and staggered to the side as if he nearly fell.

Li Zitong also floated to the opposite direction. It was not until he reached the ship railing that he finally stopped; borrowing the bouncing momentum he soared high, like an eagle snatching a chick he aimed to grab Kou Zhong's head, who, by this time was nearly falling into the river. His two hands protruded from inside his sleeves, all ten fingers opened wide toward the tian ling acupoint on the top of Kou Zhong's head.

Xiang Yushan and the others were about to rush forward to help, but Xu Ziling stood in front of them and spread his arms wide to stop. Calm and composed, he said, "No need to be afraid!"

He was the only one who could see clearly that Kou Zhong was borrowing his own yang true qi within the yin true qi to completely neutralize Li Zitong's forceful internal energy.

Li Zitong's internal energy was of hard, yang-character, by lucky coincidence, it was curbed by Kou Zhong's soft, yin-character energy. Therefore, although his power was deeper than Kou Zhong's, he still was not able to harm Kou Zhong's meridians.

Xu Ziling took three more steps forward, maintaining the same distance to the two combatants, but still did not make any move. However, whenever Li Zitong was in the vicinity, he would feel Xu Ziling's powerful threat, so that he had to reserve some of his power and thus did not dare to go all-out in dealing with Kou Zhong.

It was a very strange feeling.

It was as if each and every move he made could not escape this observer, who glared like a tiger watching his prey. As soon as he had slight lax concentration, the opponent would hit his weak point or flaw with tens of thousands catties strong thunderbolt.

Naturally he could not protest Xu Ziling standing too close, because early on he had already said that he was not afraid of the two boys joining hands to take up

the challenge.

His claw was about to hit Kou Zhong; who would have thought that it was as if there was oil on this kid's feet? With matchless agility he slid three chi away, just like a swimming fish. Not only Kou Zhong evaded his strike, he also sprang up high in the air and made somersault, which was about a chi higher than Li Zitong, who was on his way down. His saber drew an arc in the air, sweeping Li Zitong's flank.

Xu Ziling was pleased inwardly, knowing that Kou Zhong derived this skill based on the swimming fish, and was able to integrate it into the battle.

Seeing not only Kou Zhong was able to evade Li Zitong's strike and even able to launch counterstrike, and that not only his saber technique did not follow any established rules but as if it came naturally without extra trouble, his shenfa [reminder: body pose or motion in martial art] was weird beyond comprehension, Xiang Yushan and the others were stupefied; they could hardly believe their own eyes.

Li Zitong was also sighing inwardly; he had no choice but to take out his three chi, two cun 'nine-section copper whip'. Applying his power to shake it, the nine-section whip pulled back and lashed out. 'Qiang!' immediately Kou Zhong and his saber were thrown away and spun very fast like a windmill. But Li Zitong himself was also jolted by the reaction force that just like Kou Zhong a moment ago, he staggered toward the ship railings and nearly fell into the river; luckily his foot caught a piece of the railing and he swung himself up to pounce on Kou Zhong again.

Xu Ziling let out a loud shout and soared into the air; one fist flew toward Li Zitong's lower abdomen, a gust of burning hot wind accompanied the punch, the power was intimidating.

Seeing Xu Ziling dared to deal with this nine-section whip – with which he ran amuck in Jianghu for many years – barehanded, Li Zitong sneered inwardly. Focusing his inner power to protect his lower abdomen, he rose up and sent his whip toward the back of Xu Ziling's head.

Susu screamed.

‘Bang!’

‘Pow!’

After Xu Ziling’s punch hit Li Zitong’s lower abdomen, like a hawk circling in the air, unexpectedly he spun around and was able to evade the whip. His left hand swept across the tip of the whip, knocking the whip section off using his fantastic power and consummate skill.

Meanwhile Kou Zhong had just landed back on the deck, immediately he brandished his saber and charged forward.

Li Zitong let out a stifled grunt. He came to sudden realization that he could only neutralize half of Xu Ziling’s burning hot fantastic force; there were at least forty-percent of that power penetrated his body. In shock he hastily transferred his own internal energy to resist, but he had already suffered minor injury.

This moment Kou Zhong arrived, pouncing down on him from the air, enveloping him with an arc of saber ray.

Even in his dream Li Zitong could not imagine that Kou Zhong’s counterattack would arrive this quickly.

Just now, in order to save his face, he went all-out with the hope of inflicting damage to Kou Zhong that he would at least vomited a couple mouthful of blood, and then he would seize the opportunity to deal with Xu Ziling, meeting hard punch with hard punch, so that Xu Ziling would suffer some damage. But now as if he did not suffer anything, like a lively dragon and animated tiger Kou Zhong was charging ferociously; Li Zitong could not stop fear from creeping up in his heart.

For the first time he no longer dared to belittle the opponent. He secretly thought that over time, these two boys might grow to be more formidable than Ning Daoqi. At least from what he knew, before turning twenty, Ning Daoqi was

not as formidable as these two boys.

The most amazing thing was that these two boys did not follow any specific method. He had neither seen nor heard anybody ever encountered combat tactic like these two's joint forces.

Li Zitong himself was crazy about martial art; he loved to discuss anything about real battle situation and military strategy, yet he had never heard anybody ever mentioned that they encountered similar situation.

‘Dang!’

Li Zitong carried out his ‘pressing the bottom of the chest/trunk’ skill, his whip lashed out toward the tip of Kou Zhong’s swiftly chopping down saber blade. In this split second, he continuously sent out nine different streams of qi, fully aware of the urgency of the situation.

The two combatants interlocked; they both used their elbows to strike each other.

‘Bang!’

By the time Kou Zhong’s feet touched the deck, his entire body shook, his legs bent down and he rolled away, straight toward the stern of the ship, splattering fresh blood everywhere, shocking the eyes and astonished the hearts of those who watched the battle.

Susu screamed and disregarding everything she rushed toward Kou Zhong; anybody would think that Kou Zhong was seriously injured.

Li Zitong spun around on the tip of his toes, turning his back against Kou Zhong to face the rushing Susu, but did not do anything to stop her.

He was, after all, an overlord of a region, so naturally he had to have some dignity.

Xu Ziling suddenly appeared as if he had just dropped from the sky, his face showed neither anxiety nor delight, as calm as still water, both palms struck together toward Li Zitong's back. Li Zitong had just swallowed back the fresh blood bubbling up from his chest toward his throat, in order to avoid losing face on the spot; at the same time he started to regret his rash decision to brave the danger alone.

If he had had his men coming with him, he would not have stuck in this bad situation. Just now for the second time he had gone all-out in his attack, hoping to inflict serious damage to Kou Zhong using his school's unique qi cultivation technique, the 'nine-section shake'; but once again he was giving Xu Ziling the opportunity to attack.

By this time he had more or less have a feel on the two boys' totally different techniques, yet there was some kind of subtle method within it that enable the two boys to blend their internal energy seamlessly. He was fully aware that just now he was barely able to neutralize Kou Zhong's yin energy with his yang power; this moment he could not immediately use his yin power to deal with Xu Ziling's apparent yang energy.

While he was thinking of dodging the attack, he suddenly discovered that a fantastic sucking force was hidden within the gust of wind generated by Xu Ziling's palms. If he dodged, the opponent could easily pull the qi back; not only the momentum would increase, it would also continue on endlessly, until it drained the opponent's strength completely.

His shock truly need not be mentioned. Immediately he roared, "How dare you!" Flicking his wrist, the whip lashed out to the hollow of Xu Ziling's palms.

Xu Ziling screamed and spurted out a mouthful of fresh blood. Like a kite with its string cut he flew over Susu, straight toward Kou Zhong.

Li Zitong struggled hard just to take half a step forward; lifting his sleeve to cover his face, he prevented Xiang Yushan and the others, who were standing about a dozen steps away, from seeing that finally he was unable to suppress his boiling blood and he spurted a little bit of fresh blood.

Up to this point, the three combatants have not even fought for ten moves yet, but everybody had already overwhelmed with the intensity of the close combat that they felt as if the sun and the moon has lost their light.

Kou Zhong was still rolling away that very soon he would hit the Baling Bang people watching on the sideline; unexpectedly he bounced back, caught Xu Ziling, and the two of them fell sitting down on the deck together.

In this short contact, as short as a flash of lightning or a spark of the flint, the two boys' true qi blended together like water and milk, flowing from each other and thus their internal injury was immediately seventy or eighty-percent healed.

Li Zitong lowered his sleeves. Still in daze, he fought hard to stand steadily.

Susu threw herself toward the two boys, bawling loudly.

Xiang Yushan, Big Sister Xiao and Yun Yuzhen unblinkingly kept their gaze on Li Zitong, ready to deal with him. Everybody could see clearly that for Li Zitong to knock down the two boys, he had to pay a bitter price.

Li Zitong was still hesitating whether he should just disregard his face and call for his men to come over to provide reinforcement when Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, helped by Susu, proudly stood up.

Kou Zhong shook the broadsword in his hand and shouted, "Li Zitong indeed has a bit of skill; let us fight again for a hundred rounds."

Hearing the ample qi in Kou Zhong's voice, Li Zitong was inwardly shocked at how formidable the internal energy cultivation from the 'Secret to Long Life' was; suddenly he moved toward the port side of the ship. His sharp gaze swept across everybody's face, he laughed aloud and said, "No wonder Old Du held such a high regard on you, you are indeed a great material that Ol' Li could not help feeling fond of your talent. Let's drop this matter here and now; I wish you all safe journey with favorable wind and favorable current."

He had been rolling about in the black way [criminal world] for many years, he

knew how to raise something up and when to put it down. Realizing that it was difficult to capture the two boys alive, plus the fact that Li Mi has issued a decree against them, he thought how much longer would you survive? This moment he'd better win their favor, in case they'd meet again in the future. Besides, this way he would avoid inciting enmity with tremendously powerful Baling Bang.

In addition, he had another thought: if they did not die, after several years, they would consider themselves to be top-notch martial art masters. This kind of enemy, one was already too many, let alone two. Therefore, he dispelled the idea of summoning his subordinates and thus creating more enemies.

Xiang Yushan and the others were stunned; this did not seem like Li Zitong's usual style.

Li Zitong cupped his fist, soared into the air, and returned safely to his ship.

Watching the two ships sailed away, they were finally convinced.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling embraced Susu, they cheerfully shouted, "We won! We won!"

By the time Yun Yuzhen and Big Sister Xiao entered their room to see them, Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were lying on the bed, Susu was sitting on a chair by the bed, the three of them were chatting amiably. The room was filled with infinite warmth.

The two women sat on the chairs on the other side. Big Sister Xiao laughed tenderly and said, "Turns out you are really that formidable, even Li Zitong was beaten and ran away."

Kou Zhong put on a modest act and said, "He simply sounded out the difficulties and retreated to avoid defeat!"

Xu Ziling was puzzled, "How did Li Zitong know that we are on board?"

Yun Yuzhen replied, "Yushan is investigating this matter right now, trying to

find the possible mole.”

Big Sister Xiao said, “This matter cannot be easily resolved; based on Li Zitong’s character, even though on the surface he spoke good words, he might secretly inform Li Mi, and thus borrow someone else’s knife to kill you.”

Susu still had lingering fears, “I was scared to death! Xiao Zhong spurted that much blood!”

Staring at Kou Zhong’s pale face from the loss of blood, she went on, “Are you sure you are all right?”

Kou Zhong sat back and said with a laugh, “I am really all right. It’s just that it will be difficult to treat Shan Xiaoge’s injury tonight.”

“Let’s wait until you are fully recovered before talking about it!” Susu said.

Big Sister Xiao said, “Tomorrow morning we will arrive at Jiangdu, I hope there won’t be any mishaps tonight.”

Giggling, Kou Zhong turned his attention to Yun Yuzhen and said, “I want to go back to my room to sleep.”

Yun Yuzhen’s pretty face blushed slightly; she angrily said, “You want to sleep, what does it have to do with me?” In her heart, however, she recalled the powerful, elegant and brilliant tactics with which he dealt with the valiant, insufferably arrogant Li Zitong. Compared to the useless Dugu Ce in dealing with Du Fuwei, she could not help making the decision who was superior and who was inferior.

Kou Zhong sprang out of bed and said to Susu, “Let Didi walk Su Jie back to your room to rest.”

Big Sister Xiao cast Kou Zhong a suggestive glance full of foxy charms; she said in a straightforward manner, “I have just got here, and you are going to sleep?”

Inwardly Kou Zhong was very happy, knowing that due to his performance just now, this coquettish woman has had a whole new level of respect for him; even her manner was different now. He said with a giggle, "After I take care of Su Jie, why don't Dajie come to my room to have a heart-to-heart chat?"

Yun Yuzhen was jealous, but just now she was being too harsh; it would be hard to turn around and withdraw her previous remark.

Big Sister Xiao laughed jovially that she looked like a flower trembling at the tip of a branch; she said, "This Miss must train you, this reckless kid, that internal injury necessitates that you must avoid wine and sex. I still want you to go deal with Yuwen Huaji, I don't want to harm you."

Susu's pretty face immediately blushed deep red; she glowered at Kou Zhong.

Kou Zhong was greatly embarrassed; he said with a bitter smile, "Dajie is truly forthcoming!"

Susu pulled Kou Zhong away and out of the room.

With only Xu Ziling, Big Sister Xiao and Yun Yuzhen left, the room temporarily quieted down.

Big Sister Xiao looked at Xu Ziling's handsome, magnificent appearance; she suddenly had a strange thought: she was quietly pondering that if this young martial art master was maturing a little bit more, with his aloof and cool temperament, his trim and straight posture, he would be an outstanding character who will make any woman fall in love with him. It's just that his interest toward women was unlike Kou Zhong, who was always full of zest; however, this same exact quality was what attracted other people the most.

She could not help teasing him, "Xu Gongzi's and Zhong Shao's personalities are so different, how could you get along so well?"

Xu Ziling was still lying on the bed practicing his internal energy, he really wished the two women would leave him alone; therefore, he snappily replied,

“Perhaps because we have been together since childhood! We are already accustomed to yield to each other.”

Yun Yuzhen was curious, “So you never had any disagreement?” she asked.

Xu Ziling was growing even more impatient; he replied randomly, “Of course we have disagreements, but when the anger subsides, we don’t have any problem anymore.”

Hearing the tone of his voice, the two women knew it was time for them to excuse themselves.

Xu Ziling breathed a sigh of relief. Thinking about the last few days, he realized that in terms of ideas and actions, the differences between him and Kou Zhong were growing bigger and bigger; he sighed.

Supposing Kou Zhong really wanted to recruit soldiers and buy horses, to fight over the world and become the emperor, would he or would he not help him?

No one knew better than him about Kou Zhong’s amazing strength. Not only his intellect surpassed others, his resourcefulness outstanding, his manner of speaking also exceptional, his method slick and sly. No matter how Xu Ziling mocked and ridiculed him, reproached him and blamed him, this kid did not get angry at all. His eloquence was like torrential tide, he knew how to see the wind and set the helm, so that it would be difficult for anybody to get really angry at him.

Kou Zhong was naturally born with charisma and magnanimity of a leader; given enough time, perhaps even Li Mi, Du Fuwei and the like would even be put to shame by him.

On the other hand, after practicing the ‘Secret to Long Life’, Xu Ziling’s desire for fame and profit, his admiration for women, were quickly pushed back that he became more and more indifferent.

All he wanted to do right now was to find a less-travelled scenic spot, where he

could wholeheartedly lock himself up for an in-depth study of martial arts, to see what kind of level he could climb to in the end.

There was a knock on the door, followed by Yun Yuzhen's voice, "Can we chat for a moment?"

Albeit unwilling, Xu Ziling simply could not be rude to anybody; helplessly he replied in affirmative.

After shutting the door, Yun Yuzhen sat on the bed. Looking down, she examined his more and more manly countenance. "Do you really dislike me, your Beautiful Shifu?" she asked softly.

Xu Ziling and Yun Yuzhen stared at each other for half a day; finally he let out a wry smile and said, "If you have ever been cheated, how do you feel? That night, when Yun Bangzhu and Dugu Ce were chatting and fooling around, the two of us were hiding in the corner, before we decided to flee."

"Ah!" Yun Yuzhen exclaimed. She was blushing so bad that even the tip of her ears turned red. At a loss to know what to do, she said, "So that's how it is, no wonder Kou Zhong was being disrespectful to me earlier, and you look down on me. But I want you to know that I have my own difficulties; such a big gang, without a strong backer, it would be very easy for us to be taken over by others."

And then, with a hopeful look on her face, she said, "After our business in Jiangdu is over, I can arrange a hiding place for you, I guarantee it will be safe."

Xu Ziling sensed that she had the intention to recruit the two of them to strengthen her Jukun Bang. His heart was moved; he speculated that the reason Kou Zhong disregarded former enmity and teased Yun Yuzhen was most likely because he wanted to get the Jukun Bang under his banner, to become what he called 'our troops'. Otherwise, when he was talking about Yun Yuzhen earlier, he would not have mentioned the 'by hook or by crook' aspect.

Kou Zhong has grown to become more and more formidable.

Yun Yuzhen stretched out her lily-white hand to caress his cheek; she said softly, “Just give it a serious thought!”

Xu Ziling waited until her hand touched the door latch before he suddenly asked, “How was Kou Zhong being disrespectful to you?”

Yun Yuzhen’s pretty face blushed; still thinking that Xu Ziling was jealous, she irately said, “He is so bad; do I need to say more?” And then she hurriedly went out.

Xu Ziling closed his eyes; suddenly his heart felt uncomfortable.

Kou Zhong was lying.

He said he was only touching Yun Yuzhen’s hand; it appeared that he was only testing Xu Ziling’s reaction to this matter.

If his reckoning was correct, Kou Zhong was going to do anything necessary to have Yun Yuzhen acknowledging her allegiance to him.

The one Kou Zhong loved was Li Xiuning, definitely not Yun Yuzhen.

This was what he called dealing with the enemy by hook or by crook.

Suddenly Xu Ziling felt that the gap between him and Kou Zhong was growing.

Book 6 Chapter 3 – Sui Emperor Yang Guang

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling climbed onto the carriage; accompanied by Big Sister Xiao and Xiang Yushan, they entered the city. Susu, accompanied by Yun Yuzhen, was riding on another carriage; they had different arrangement.

Afraid that the Yuwen Clan might obtain information and thus prevent the two boys from entering the Palace, Dugu Sheng personally came out to meet them.

Surprisingly, this Dugu Clan martial art master – who ranked second only to Dugu Feng – had a rather unremarkable appearance. He was about fifty, short and wiry, and looked a bit like an old monkey. But his eyes, which looked half open and half close, were deep and bright; the taiyang acupoints on his temples were protruding high, so that people immediately knew that he was not someone to be trifled with.

Toward Kou and Xu, two boys, he was polite, but kept his distance; however, he was quite amiable toward Xiao Huan and Xiang Yushan, evidently he did not have too high of a regard toward Kou and Xu.

Under the escort of Dugu Sheng and about a hundred imperial bodyguards, the party entered the city of Yangzhou.

Returning to their hometown, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were immediately overwhelmed with unbearable itch; they really wished to slip outside right away to look for their old friends and foes and say hello, also perhaps to see if Yan Laoda [see Book 1 Chapter 1] was still alive and well.

Xiang Yushan whispered in the two boys' ears, "We are really lucky, today Yang

Guang happens to be in the Palace. You don't know it, but since becoming the Emperor, he never stopped, always going on a tour or a military expedition, infuriating the heavens exasperating the people, angering the gods and distressing the ghosts; otherwise, the people would not have rebelled."

Big Sister Xiao sighed and said, "Now he is giving the western capital Chang'an to his grandson, Dai Wang [wang – king/prince] Yang You, and the eastern capital Luoyang to another grandson, Yue Wang Yang Dong, while he himself is hiding in here, so scared that he even abandoned the Luoyang's sixteen-courtyard madams. To his surprise, however, Du Fuwei attacked Liyang, Li Zitong is also moving to Jiangdu. Basically there is no happy place for him on the earth."

Irritated, Xiang Yushan said, "Dai Wang Yue Wang, one is twelve, the other eleven, unexpectedly they are in charge of western and eastern capitals; won't the true power fall into the hands of high-ranking ministers such as Yang Shichong and the others? If any mishaps happen to Yang Guang, the world will be ten times more chaotic than right now."

Listening to this, Kou Zhong's eyes lit up, and Xu Ziling could see it clearly.

The carriage suddenly stopped.

Dugu Sheng spoke from outside the window, "His Holiness has just gone to Lin Jiang Palace, we must change our itinerary."

After ascending the throne, Yang Guang issued a decree to build the city of Yangzhou, which formerly was under his stewardship as the Zongguan, and changed its official title to Jiangdu. Not only the city was expanded, numerous palaces arose, parks and garden embellished it, north of the city, where there were mountain on one side and water on the other, he also established Gui Yan, Hui Liu, Song Lin, and the others, the so-called 'Shu Gang Ten Palaces'.

But perhaps the most magnificent was the Lin Jiang Palace, which was built by the shore of Yangtze River. Whenever Yang Guang was prompted by a sudden impulse, whether it was morning or evening, he would go there to enjoy the beautiful scenery of Yangtze River.

When Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had an audience with this muddleheaded ruler of the historically shortest, and the fastest to disappear, dynasty, he was having a drinking party on a palace balcony overlooking the Yangtze River, accompanied by his favorite concubines Xiao Yu and Zhu Gui'er [gui means imperial concubine, so I don't think it was her actual name], completely oblivious of the ups and downs of the chaos of war outside.

Kou Zhong and the others alighted from their carriage at the square in front of the Palace, which was tightly guarded by the Imperial Guards. After a thorough body search, which was personally conducted by Dugu Sheng, to make sure that they did not bring any weapons, he led them into the Palace. However, Xiang Yushan and Big Sister Xiao had to remain at the gate.

As Dugu Sheng was leading them through the corridors and pathways, they could hear the surging water of Yangtze River, mingled with faint melodious music from the continuously stretching palaces ahead.

This was the first time that the two boys entered such a richly ornamented, brightly decorated, splendid and majestic building. Momentarily their eyes were unable to take it all, and they were quite at a loss.

Kou Zhong whispered, "Now this is what I call glory, splendor, wealth and rank."

"Don't talk!" from the front, Dugu Sheng coldly shouted.

Kou Zhong jumped in fright and immediately shut his mouth.

Xu Ziling mused in his heart, 'Only ghosts are willing to live in such noisy, raucous, tacky, and irritating place like this. For me, it would be enough if I can live deep in the mountains, in a thatched hut in a secluded valley, with beautiful scenery and birds and beasts as my company.'

There were Imperial Guards everywhere, with checkpoints at every entryway; without Dugu Sheng leading the way, it would be impossible for them to move a single step.

When the Wangjiang Tai [Riverview Balcony; 'wang jiang' means 'looking at the river'] was in sight, an official appeared ahead and stopped them.

The man looked gentle and handsome, about thirty-five, thirty-six years old. Upon introduction by Dugu Sheng, they found out that he was the interior minister Yu Shiji, one of Yang Guang's most trusted courtiers.

Noticing his unstable, floating footsteps, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling knew that not only this person did not know martial art, his body was scooped empty by wine and women, so that his appearance looked like he was too weak to stand up to the wind.

Normally, an interior minister ought to be a high-ranking eunuch, but this person's appearance did not have a real eunuch flavor, making it difficult for them to make correct assessment.

After sizing up the two boys, Yu Shiji said to Dugu Sheng, "It's really them."

Dugu Sheng nodded in affirmative.

It was only then did Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling find out that Yu Shiji was involved in this matter. If that was the case, then Yang Guang's other favored minister, the Imperial Censor Fei Yun, ought to be key personnel in this operation, which was directed toward the Yuwen Clan, as well.

After carefully examining the two boys again, Yu Shiji said, "Give the account book to me first, the two of you may wait in the side chamber. When the opportune time comes, this official may take you to appear before His Highness."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged glances; they were unwilling, but finally had to hand the account book over to Yu Shiji.

Yu Shiji immediately flipped the pages. When he reached certain page, he suddenly laughed aloud and said, "General Sheng, this time we really obtain a treasure. I want to see how much longer Yuwen Clan will be able to shine."

Hearing that, Dugu Sheng smiled while twisting the tip of his moustache.

The two boys waited in a room by Wangjiang Tai for nearly two sichen [4 hours]. They waited until the sun was about to set, still no Yu Shiji or Dugu Sheng to take them to see Yang Guang.

The palaces, as well as the courtyards, were tightly guarded by Imperial Guards, making them feel like prisoner in the palace hall.

Xu Ziling sat quietly in a corner. Looking at Kou Zhong, who was pacing back and forth restlessly, he frowned and said, "Could you be a bit more patient?"

Kou Zhong halted in front of him; he sighed and said, "Maybe we were wrong; now even the account book has been taken away, and I still don't know how we are going to leave this place."

"Don't worry!" Xu Ziling said, "As long as we are still useful, they will rely on us. These people put the cart before the horse, they don't care that outside the chaos is turning the sky and the earth upside down, they are thinking of fighting with other people around instead. No wonder the rebels' momentum is growing day by day."

After a short pause, he went on, "What worries me most is Su Jie; after meeting that muddleheaded ruler, we must find a way to leave this place and rendezvous with Su Jie, and immediately go as far away as possible. Whether Yuwen Clan is toppled or not, we must not tarry in this place too long."

Kou Zhong sat down by his side; he said, "You are right. If Yang Guang issues an imperial decree to search and confiscate the Yuwen Clan's possession and have their entire family exterminated, it will incite a tempest; Yuwen Huaji and the others will definitely fight with all their strength. If that happens, it would be strange indeed if Jiangdu does not turn into a mess."

Xu Ziling added, "Don't forget that Ol' Die and that Li Budong are glaring at Jiangdu like a tiger watching its prey. As soon as they know that Jiangdu is in chaos, they will immediately deploy their troops to attack. Ay, this thought is really frightening!"

Kou Zhong did not know what to think.

While they were busy with their own thoughts, Yu Shiji came in. With him was a big, fat official, whose face was wide, his eyes thin, his nose long like a wine gourd; in short, a crafty villain look.

Yu Shiji excitedly said, "Two Xiongdi, come meet Imperial Censor Daren."

Hearing him addressing them as 'brothers', Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were rather flattered. Thinking that this must be Yu Shiji's partner Fei Yun, they hastily paid their respect according to the way Big Sister Xiao taught them.

Fei Yun assumed an amiable appearance; he said with a chuckle, "Two Xiao Xiongdi have rendered great merit, these days this official will present a memorial to His Highness, he will reward you heavily."

"Let's strike while the iron is hot," Yu Shiji continued, "High Highness ought to see the account book. Right now we are going to take two Xiao Xiongdi to have an audience with His Highness, but you must not mention anything about the account book. Even if His Highness ask, you must pretend not to know there is such thing."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other in dismay; they understood that the great merit of obtaining the account book would be falsely claimed by these two crafty and fawning despicable men.

Fei Yun laughed and said, "Two Xiao Xiongdi must be men who understand reason. Just serve us well, and I guarantee you will enjoy endless glory, splendor, wealth and rank. We are here!"

The two boys looked at each other with bitter smile; they could only follow behind the two men helplessly.

Fei Yun, who was leading the way, suddenly lowered his voice. The two boys quickly focused their power to listen, immediately they were able to hear every

single word. He said, "In one day we received three emergency dispatches from Luoyang. Wang Shichong is really shameful; did he want us to lose our heads? I burned all the documents."

"There is another headache," Yu Shiji said, "Just now the Imperial Guard Commander Sima Dekan ignored me when I tried to stop him, he forced himself into the Wangjiang Tai to see His Highness, reporting something about someone exploiting the Imperial Guard army provisions, that the soldiers don't have enough to eat and are hungry. And most of them came from Guanzhong, they knew that the Li Clan is raising an army to rebel, so they worried that their hometown is in trouble; batch by batch they ran away from Jiangdu, so he wanted His Majesty to issue an imperial decree to pacify the heart of the people."

Fei Yun laughed and said, "Fortunately the person who exploited the army provisions is His Highness himself, we are simply carrying out his order, so he cannot put the blame on us. Hee hee ... did His Highness have Sima Dekan, that fellow who showed no understanding of the times, flogged?"

Yu Shiji replied, "I don't know if His Holiness has changed from his excessive stubbornness? Or perhaps he knew that the Imperial Guard Minister General Dou Xian has also led his troops to flee, so he clearly knew that the situation is serious. He only ordered Sima Dekan to immediately pursue Dou Xian and have him come back here, or else he will have to present his own head. I really wish Dou Xian could go a little faster!"

Meanwhile they had reached the steps leading to the Wangjiang Tai. Yu and Fei, two men stopped talking. Listening to them, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling behind them were aghast. Yang Guang definitely was a muddleheaded ruler, otherwise how could he let treacherous court officials like Yu Shiji and Fei Yun emerge?

"Citizen Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling have arrived!" The herald at the gate announced as the two boys followed Yu Shiji and Fei Yun toward the stone steps leading to Yang Guang's dragon throne. They kneeled three times and kowtowed nine times [my dictionary has this additional information: formal etiquette on meeting the emperor]. After the ritual was performed, the herald announced again, "You may rise!"

The two boys followed Yu Shiji and Fei Yun stood up, and focused their attention to look. Immediately they were taken aback.

They saw the twenty-zhang wide dragon platform was packed with beautiful imperial concubines; there were at least fifty, sixty women, like the stars cupping themselves around the moon [idiom from Analects], surrounding the elevated dragon throne, busy feeding fruits to the Great Sui Emperor Yang Guang.

Dugu Sheng stood erect with straight face under the platform, leading the Imperial Guards standing around the platform, separating Yang Guang from Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling.

After stroking an imperial concubine's breasts by his side, Yang Guang looked down the platform. As if he did not see Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling at all, he looked at Fei Yun and said with a laugh, "Fei Qingjia [term used by the emperor for his subjects] is here, quickly help Zhen [an emperor referring to himself] solve this problem."

Yun Shiji bowed and laughed to flatter him, "Your Highness, these two ..."

"Zhen knows," Yang Guang impatiently cut him off, "Other matter can wait."

Under the illumination of the palace lantern, Yang Guang's countenance looked worse than Xiang Yushan before his illness was cured; he was so pale that he looked like a dead person. His age looked to be only around fifty, his head and shoulders stood tall; although he was wearing bright-colored nine-dragon gown, with a tall crown on his head, he gave a depressing impression of a dead person wearing burial clothes.

Anybody could see that his destiny already nearing its end, his days were numbered.

Fei Yun hastily said, "Your Highness, please reveal it to us!"

Yang Guang sighed and said, "Zhen really don't understand, what's not good in

Jiangdu? To the south facing the Great River, undulating hills, pleasant scenery, since ancient times has been number one scenic spot in Jiang Huai; yet troops are running away these days, even Dou Xian has personally fled. Qingjia, what do you think is the reason?"

This time even Fei Yun and Yun Shiji were left speechless, other people need not be mentioned; they were quiet out of fear, afraid that they might incur unexpected calamity.

Fei Yun could not but respond; clearing his throat, he said, "There must be some people spreading rumors, instigating the morale of the troops. Weichen [this small official] must investigate clearly, and then report to Your Highness."

Yang Guang let out a cold laugh and said, "Who could instigate the morale of Zhen's troops? Zhen has fought to the south and attacked to the north, pacifying the land under the heavens, three times went on military campaign to Gaoli [Korea], my military power unrivalled, admired by officers and soldiers. Zhen really cannot believe they would believe idle talk. Quickly investigate this matter thoroughly."

Kou Zhong could not refrain from nudging Xu Ziling with his elbow, while putting up a 'I don't want to hear the truth' expression on his face.

Although Yang Guang did not seem to look at him, unexpectedly he saw that; angrily he shouted, "Why is that little one's expression so strange? He has the audacity of being disrespectful to Zhen."

Fei Yun and Yu Shiji's soul flew away and scattered, afraid that before these two witnesses could testify, Yang Guang already had their heads chopped.

Kou Zhong secretly signaled Xu Ziling, ready to break out the siege and flee for their lives, to create a gap they could exploit to get out. This moment he did not even want to kowtow; he said with a giggle, "Most probably it was because Your Highness is too profound that you are able to think that deep. We are only simple ant people, naturally our thought process is also a lot simpler. Just a moment ago Xiaomin [small/lowly citizen] was not able to penetrate Your Highness' enigmatic thought, that's why I knitted my little face."

Everybody cried out inwardly, Yang Guang hated it very much when people used sarcasm against him; this time Kou Zhong was really courting death.

Under these circumstances, Zhu Gui'er, who was serving Yang Guang eating fruits by his side, also did not dare to speak up to help Kou Zhong.

Dugu Sheng sighed inwardly; if he had to personally behead these two boys, he really did not know how to explain it to the Baling Bang people.

Everybody waited with bated breath; sure enough, Yang Guang's countenance sank and he said coldly, "What profound or simple? Kid, what is exactly your point?"

Kou Zhong remained calm, while quietly gathered his mysterious power; he said indifferently, "What kid was thinking was that if everybody is able to think like Your Highness, supporting the left and holding on to the right, yet they still want to desert the army, then they are not real men."

At this point, no one did not consider Kou Zhong to be a criminal on the death row, because what he did was exactly what he should not do in front of Yang Guang, *i.e.* 'telling the truth'.

Yang Guang was startled; and then he slapped the arm of his dragon throne and laughed so hard that his body swayed back and forth. Like speaking to a child, he said, "That is indeed simple! That is indeed simple!"

Everybody's heart went up and down following the sound of his laughter, because he loved laughing madly before killing someone.

Xu Ziling nodded slightly to Kou Zhong, reminded him to be ready to slip away any moment.

The laughter suddenly stopped.

Yang Guang coughed twice, while allowing Zhu Gui'er and Madame Xiao to

wipe the tears on the corner of his eye. When they were done, he looked down at Kou Zhong and said, "As the Emperor, Zhen is buried in ten thousand affairs every day, so that my brain is a bit slow, causing damage to the country and suffering to the people. This time you, kid, spoke out the root cause, Zhen immediately think of countermeasures. Guards!"

All the imperial concubines were laughing and giggling tenderly to flatter him.

Dugu Sheng was still thinking that his fear finally happened; bowing down, he responded, "Dugu Sheng is here!"

Yang Guang was stunned, "This matter cannot be done by Qingjia. Guards!"

Everybody looked at each other; they did not understand, whether in the imperial court or in Jianghu, Dugu Sheng had a resounding prestige, why was he not qualified to do such a simple thing as putting these two boys to death?

Fei Yun and Yu Shiji braced themselves and responded in chorus, "Your Highness, please reveal your wish!"

Yang Guang cheerfully said, "Immediately go around the surrounding area and collect all widows, unmarried women, even Buddhist nuns and Taoist priestess, anybody who is fit to accompany Zhen's troops, to boost the morale of the troops."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's countenance immediately changed; was he going to kill a lot of people?

Who would have thought that Fei Yun and Yu Shiji immediately clapped and cheered, lauding the brilliance of the Sage's idea. Amidst the roar of applause, Yang Guang smiled proudly while twisting the tip of his beard; his Sage's heart was greatly comforted.

Xu Ziling could not help shouting, "Your Highness!"

Yang Guang let out a cold snort, "Enough!" he barked, "Today Zhen have spent

too much time dealing with national affairs, you are all dismissed!”

The herald at the door shouted, “Court’s dismissed!”

“Thank heavens and thank the earth,” Yu Shiji muttered under his breath. Together with Fei Yun, they dragged Kou and Xu, two boys, out of the Palace.

Leaving the Wangjiang Tai, Kou Zhong broke free from Yu Shiji’s grab and said, “We have not said anything about our business, how can we leave?”

Wiping the cold sweats on his brow, Fei Yun angrily said, “We almost get killed because of you, this slave who spoke recklessly. Humph!”

Kou Zhong’s eyes shot a cold ray, “What did you call me?” he said.

Fei Yun was agitated; he nearly flew into rage, but Yu Shiji interrupted him, “We are on the same side, what’s passed in passed, why do we have to argue about it?”

Turning to Kou Zhong, he said, “Your head is still on your neck, just consider yourself lucky, do you still have to blab around and show off? Right now let this official make arrangement for you to rest, I’ll pick several palace maids who are pretty and considerate to serve you. When the time is right, we’ll arrange for you two to have an audience with the Emperor.”

Xu Ziling deeply detested these two big treacherous court officials, he said grimly, “Just with that one account book plus two gentlemen with silver tongue it is enough to kill Yuwen Huaji, even if we stayed here, there won’t be any good; we have decided to leave.”

Fei Yun was still glowering at Kou Zhong, as if he wanted to eat him alive. But just looking at his belly, he probably could eat at least half of Kou Zhong.

Yu Shiji stepped in between Fei Yun and Kou and Xu, two boys; he tried to persuade using all possible arguments, “This is just a minor misunderstanding, two Xiao Xiongdi must not let emotions dictate your decision.”

Kou Zhong stared coldly at Fei Yun for a moment, and then he calmly said, "Xiao Ling is right, we have to go! If you insist on us, two brothers, staying, I don't even know what I might say next time we see His Highness."

With a cold laugh Fei Yun said, "You dare to threaten us."

Yu Shiji stared hard at Fei Yun, but at the same time he signaled him to keep calm and not be impatient, to deal with these two boys later. And then, putting up a smile he said, "Two Xiao Xiongdi did not know it, but although the account book has been given to His Highness, but as for when he will actually thumb through it, even His Highness himself did not know."

Xu Ziling was taken aback, "So Yu Daren has not told His Highness?" he asked.

"Of course I have," Yu Shiji replied, "But His Highness acted as if he did not hear it; he was busy kissing and petting with Imperial Concubine Xiao, and simply told us to put it down, so that he could look at it when he has time. Therefore, we still have to rely on two gentlemen. Hey! I heard from Yushan that Yuwen Huaji is your big enemy, we all have anger against a common enemy, don't be concerned over this kind of small things!"

Turning to Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong asked, "What do you think we should do?"

Xu Ziling was well aware that unless they fought the problem on their face, they would never leave this dreadful place. If it were only the two of them, they could always forcefully break through and leave it to fate. However, having to worry about Susu's safety, they could only endure and keep the tone of their voice in check.

"Very well!" he reluctantly said, "But we only want to rest, no need for any palace maids to serve us."

Yu Shiji breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Not a problem at all. Everything will be as you wish."

Kou Zhong lay down on a long padded bench by the window, listening to the rushing water of Yangtze River; his thoughts wandering far away, he said, "Being the emperor really knows how to enjoy life."

Sitting by his side, Xu Ziling was leaning against the window, gazing at the starry sky of the dreary winter night. "Seeing Yang Guang like that, you still want to be the emperor?" he asked in disbelief.

Kou Zhong sprang up; he came over to Xu Ziling. Half kneeling, he also gazed upon the night sky outside. He said, "Since we have to pass this long night in the Palace, can't you let me, Kou Zhong, to reveal a little bit of my heartfelt wishes?"

"Don't lie!" Xu Ziling said guardedly.

Kou Zhong was startled, "When did I lie to you?" he asked.

Xu Ziling sighed and said, "This is at least the second lie. The first lie was 'I, Zhong Shao, only touched Beautiful Shifu's slender lily-white hands'."

Kou Zhong's thick face blushed; he said, "You must have asked that Poniang this kind of embarrassing question about which part of her Laozi has touched, didn't you?"

Not yielding a single step, Xu Ziling let out a cold laugh and said, "So you finally admitted that you have lied to me?"

Kou Zhong was peeved, "This kind of passionate love thing, naturally I cannot tell all the gory details to you."

Xu Ziling said indifferently, "I don't seem to recall hearing Zhong Shao said that he likes her?"

Kou Zhong let out a bitter laugh, "Just consider me afraid of you!" he admitted, "All right! I was not totally honest, hee hee ... I have never been an honest person; at least you, Ling Shao should know it better than anyone."

Xu Ziling understood that Kou Zhong realized that he [Xu] has seen through his [Kou] heart, and knew that it was time to stop. Going back to the original topic, he asked, "So what kind of heartfelt wishes do you want to reveal to me?"

Kou Zhong roared in laughter as he stood up. Sitting on the arm of the chair, he put his hand on Xu Ziling's shoulder. His tiger eyes flashed mysteriously, he turned his gaze toward the garden scenery under the night sky outside the window. His voice heavy as he said, "Although I said those things, I do not really want to be an emperor; rather, I only want to join the hard-to-come-by game of power struggle over the world. A game where there is no rule, where the ideas of compassion, duty, propriety and integrity are only lip service, but not being used to govern real action in real life. Anybody with enough power, anybody whose fist is stiff enough, will be able to call himself a king."

Xu Ziling was silent for half a day, finally he said slowly, "I understand what you mean; since you were young you were always unwilling to be left out, you always need stimulation and challenges, you need other people to respect you, to fawn on you. You are never afraid of anyone ..."

"Wrong!" Kou Zhong cut him off, "I fear nothing in Heaven or Earth, but I am scared of you. If you became my enemy, I won't be able to sleep in peace."

Xu Ziling said indifferently, "At that time, wouldn't you try to eliminate me by hook or by crook?"

Kou Zhong laughed so hard that he almost choked; gasping for breath, he said, "First of all, you can't possibly become my enemy, at most you'll just ignore me! Even if I, Kou Zhong, can be merciless toward anybody, but I can never be heartless toward you. Good Xiongdi, let's not indulge in flights of fancy, let's think about how to get away and go find Su Jie! Looking at that dead fatty's expression, after our business with Yang Guang is done, I guarantee that by the time we step out of the Palace gate, there will be several hundreds sabers and axes on every side, ready to chop us, two silly bugs, into minced meat sauce."

Xu Ziling made an eye signal to him, and then he stretched and yawned, "I am dead tired," he said, "Go to sleep!"

Book 6 Chapter 4 – Confidential Matter That Is Not A Secret

Kou Zhong slipped out the window and came back. Dejected, he said, “Those two damn bastards are really cruel, the security is so tight that even a fly can’t escape.”

The place they were staying was located in the garden at the southwest corner of Linjiang Palace, to the west and south of the place were open spaces with nowhere to hide. The walls were high with watchtowers everywhere. To the east was a big garden, to the north was about a dozen big bamboo groves with no passable path. Therefore, the only way out was through the garden.

Xu Ziling came back a step earlier, he also managed to obtain clear picture of the situation. Sighing, he said, “The only way is to charge through the high wall, killing our way out. It’s just that there is a thirty-zhang open space between the small garden to the high wall, I am afraid before we reach the foot of the wall, we’d be shot dead by the rain of arrows from the watchtower guards, or perhaps we’d be cutoff by the opponent’s martial art masters. How’s the situation at the flower garden?”

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and replied, “By looking at my expression, you ought to know the situation without having to ask me; there are hidden guards everywhere in the flower garden, plus it is brightly lit, thinking about escaping without the gods know and the ghosts detect is just lunatic ravings. This must be personally arranged by Dugu Sheng to prevent us from escaping.”

And then, with a wolf-viciousness he said, “If we cannot get away from a place like this, it will really damage our reputation as the Yangzhou Two Dragons.

Those two damn b@stard will despise us even more.”

Xu Xiling mused, “Have it ever occurred to you that even if we manage to get out, we still need to crash our way through the city defense, and then once we are inside the city, it’s still unknown whether we will be able to find Su Jie or not.”

Kou Zhong chuckled lightly and said, “Don’t worry! Beautiful Shifu will not dare to deceive me; she has already agreed to leave secret marks all around the city, so that we can easily find their location. This is the benefit of using the ‘by hook or by crook’ method.”

Xu Ziling was dumbstruck and unable to reply.

Kou Zhong continued his analysis, “The security here seems to be incomparably tight, but we can clearly see that the imperial guards are undisciplined and their morale is low, everybody wants to shirk responsibility or even run away from here. Hey! Just think, if we suddenly gone missing, what would the imperial guards guarding us do?”

Xu Ziling’s eyes lit up immediately, “They would think that since Yang Guang ordered Dugu Sheng to keep watch over us, it would mean they are not fulfilling their obligations; it would be strange indeed if Yang Guang did not behead them all. Naturally the entire team will leave their job to join the rank of army deserters.”

Kou Zhong said, “Under normal circumstances, my stratagem might not be useful, but right now their heart is anxious, they have misgivings toward each other, they would not dare to lightly and rashly make indiscriminate action! We still have several sichen until daybreak anyway, we might as well wait for two more d@mn sichen, and then when those guards are cold and tired, we will commence our grand plan.”

The end of yin hour [3-5am], early mao hour [5-7am].

‘Whoo! Whoo!’ With two signals, one after another two shadows flitted out of the courtyard house where Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stayed, toward the bamboo

groves, while several wind lanterns in the vicinity went out at the same time. Followed by chaotic noise of snapping bamboo branches, which alerted the guards.

Among the Imperial Guards Dugu Sheng dispatched to keep watch over the two boys this time, there was no lack of martial art masters. Immediately about a dozen men flew toward the bamboo groves in pursuit of the two boys, yet they did not even see any shadow of ghost.

Nobody in the Imperial Guards was not familiar with Yang Guang's temperament; they did not dare to ring the bell to sound the alarm, they only split up and searched around. Some even went into the two boys' quarter to take a quick look; after confirming that nobody was inside, they hurriedly joined the search operation outside.

Half a sichen later, several leaders huddled around in discussion. Someone said, "This is awful; does anybody have any plan?"

Another man said, "If we stay here, we will die for sure; if we flee right now, we still have a little chance of surviving. Please forgive Xiaodi for not keeping you company."

In reality, everybody had the same thought, so as soon as that man spoke up, a hundred or so Imperial Guards scrambled out in confusion, climbing over the wall and disappeared until nobody remained.

Only then did Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling crawled out from the under the bed. The former laughed and said, "While there is still time, let's get some of Zhen Sao's steamed stuffed buns!" [See Book 1 Chapter 1 on Sister-in-law Zhen.]

By the time Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong entering the city via the secret passage, *i.e.* the water sewer, the sky was starting to brighten. Returning to their former haunts, everything seemed to be familiar, but also seemed to be unusually strange. There was an indescribable inspiration in their heart.

"Last time Yuwen Huaji used hunting dogs to follow our trail, he should find this secret entrance; why didn't he have his men to block it then?" Kou Zhong

wondered.

Xu Ziling was applying his internal energy to dry his drenched clothes, “Perhaps he wanted to keep this secret passage for his own needs!” he blurted out.

Kou Zhong gave him a push and said with a laugh, “Why bother applying your internal energy? Let’s go to Chen’s old clothing store and steal two sets of clothes! Giving that penny-pincher some heartburn is a good thing.”

The two boys laughed heartily, feeling very pleased with themselves; taking advantage before the sky was not quite bright, they leaped onto the roof of a commoner’s house, like an old horse who know the way home, they flew over houses and building, enjoying the cold wind against their face, rushing toward Chen’s old clothing store in the eastern part of the city.

Since they were counting their chickens before they were hatched, unexpectedly it fell through.

When they arrived, they found out that Chen’s old clothing store, as well as about a dozen other stores nearby, had been completely converted into Sui army lodging house.

Kou Zhong heaved a sigh and said, “These troops are like locusts who devoured Yangzhou until it is riddled with gaping wounds and cuts and bruises all over. Ay! Zhen Sao is so pretty, I do hope those thief soldiers did not take a fancy on her.”

Without saying a word, Xu Ziling swept across a side alley toward the marketplace.

Sure enough, Sister-in-law Zhen’s steamed bun stall was gone; on its place was a fruit and vegetable stall. The market was still bustling with noise and excitement, but the people they were bumping into were unfamiliar faces with out-of-the-area accent.

Xu Ziling grabbed the fruit and vegetable stall owner and asked, “Where did that auntie who used to sell steamed buns [orig. baozi – stuffed steamed buns

and mantou – plain steamed buns] go?”

The owner let out a bitter sigh and said, “Of course she is gone! Only people with nowhere to go like me would stay here waiting to die. But if my merchandise is robbed clean again, tomorrow I am going to try rushing out the city gate.”

An old man, the owner of the next stall said, “Is Sire asking about the Old Feng? Are you their relatives?”

Kou Zhong hastily replied, “We are his nephews.”

The old man shook his head and sighed, “Their steamed buns are too famous. As soon as His Highness arrived in Jiangdu, they were enlisted as cook in the Palace. Afterwards nobody knew what happened to them.”

Xu Ziling clenched his fists, turned around and walked away.

Kou Zhong ran after him; he followed him turning to the left and swerving to the right in the midst of the tide of people in the marketplace. “Where are you going?” he shouted.

“I want to rescue Zhen Sao out of that place,” Xu Ziling indignantly replied.

Kou Zhong grabbed his arm, “Calm down!” he said, “Have you forgotten the moon in the well?”

Xu Ziling was shaken and stopped abruptly. Immediately the people behind them pushed them forward and said, “Don’t block the way.”

The two boys hastily squeezed their way out of the marketplace. Leaving that noisy overcrowded place, their head cleared out somewhat.

Kou Zhong proposed to treat their ailing tummy first.

They went to a nearby restaurant and sat down. After absent-mindedly stuffed several kinds of steamed buns into their stomach, Kou Zhong said, "No matter what you want to do, I will support you, but you must not be hot-headed; first of all, we need to solve the problem of Su Jie, and then we can have a free hand in going all out."

He sighed and went on, "The Great Sui is really finished, the world has turned into a terrible mess, if nobody took the initiative to unify the world, I don't know how much more misery the people on the street will have to suffer. One bad Tujue man fight his way into the Central Plains, we, Han people, will fall under the harsh rule of foreign power. Only if you are willing to help me will we be able to rise in building the rivers and mountains [i.e. country] and, as much as possible, do some good things for the innocent people."

Xu Ziling said, "Your thought seems to be too beautiful and too far for me. Now is not the time to discuss this matter; we slipped away like this, do you think Dugu Sheng will be willing to let us go? It would be best if we could find our Su Jie as soon as possible."

Kou Zhong grabbed a couple of meat steamed buns, stood up and said, "You are in charge of buying us two new sets of clean clothes, I will go look for secret markings; we will meet again at the eastern end of Duke Ma Alley later."

Xu Ziling looked at him and said, "Why not go together? If something happened, we can look after each other better."

"The two of us together is too conspicuous," Kou Zhong replied, "Plus it would be easier for our old acquaintances to recognize us. Going separately is a bit safer."

Xu Ziling had no choice but to let him go.

Kou Zhong went strutting down the street; from time to time he came across Sui troops, womenfolk was nearly extinct from the street, only older ones remained. Merely from this fact it was clear why so many people wanted to leave Yangzhou.

In the mind of the people, Sui troops were more frightening than any rebel force.

Suddenly someone called out, “Zhong Shao!”

Kou Zhong jumped in fright. Turning toward the voice, he saw someone hiding in an alley, beckoning him to come.

Kou Zhong hesitated for half a day, but he finally came over. A young, robust-looking man, who was a bit older than he was, with dark skin and sturdy build, who seemed to know one or two stances of martial art, grabbed his shoulders and said, “It is really you! At first I wasn’t sure. Hey! You seem to live well!”

This man was called Gui Xiliang, he used to hang around the same crowd with Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling. When they were younger, they even had several bouts with another gang together, but all ended in defeat. However, the relationship among these several boys could not be considered bad.

Kou Zhong noticed that he was wearing Zhuhua Bang [bamboo flower gang] uniform, there were even three bamboo leaves embroidered on the lapel of his robe. “Since when did you become a Xiangzhu [fragrant master]?” he asked in astonishment, “You did not climb over a lot of other people’s heads, I hope?”

Gui Xiliang replied, “It was entirely due to Bangzhu showing favor to me, by receiving me as his disciple; ay!”

Kou Zhong pulled him toward the other end of the alley, he was puzzled, “It was a good thing, right? Why are you sighing?”

Gui Xiliang said, “Such a big deal, and you did not know? Where have you been hiding these past couple of years? Where is Xiao Ling?”

“Answer my question first,” Kou Zhong said.

Gui Xiliang let out a muted snort and said, “Whatever I say, I am the Xiangzhu, why should I answer your question first?”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "So you want to be the Laoda [the oldest, *i.e.* 'the boss']? In that case, I'll let you be you! These past couple of years Xiao Ling and I went mingling in the Jianghu. Du Fuwei, Zhai Rang, and the others have shook hands with us and drank wine together. Ha! Your turn to speak."

Evidently Gui Xiliang thought he was bragging; clicking his tongue, he said, "You, this little demon, look more thick and solid than I am, it's a pity just like before, you did not make any progress. Ay! Do you know that two months ago Bangzhu was beaten to death by the men sent by that muddleheaded ruler? It was simply because he refused to hand over Yu Ling from the Tianxian Lou and sent her away instead."

Kou Zhong raised his thumb and praised, "Good man!"

With a bitter laugh Gui Xiliang said, "A dead good man is d@mn fart useless. Now most of the people in our gang have scattered away, leaving only about a hundred men. We hope that when Du Fuwei, or perhaps Li Zitong come to attack, we can be their contact on the inside so that we can avenge Bangzhu, the Senior."

Kou Zhong's eyes lit up; lowering his voice, he asked, "Have you elected new Bangzhu?"

Gui Xiliang sighed and said, "Elect what ghost Bangzhu? Right now we are like a sheet of loose sand, we are only waiting for the muddleheaded ruler's death, and then we'll hold an assembly in Danyang, to look at the possibility of electing the new Bangzhu."

Meanwhile they have reached the end of the alley, ahead was another big street. Gui Xiliang halted his steps and said, "I shall not come out to the light. Do you remember that guy, Xing Rong's house? I am hiding in there."

Kou Zhong casually asked, "How's Yan Laoda?"

"You still have the nerve to ask about him?" Gui Xiliang said, "I don't know what kind of thing the two of you stole from some government official, you

implicated more than a hundred people; since then, no one has seen them. I heard it has something to do with Yuwen Huaji; is that right?”

Kou Zhong heaved a deep sigh and said, “Don’t worry! I guarantee that Yuwen Huaji won’t have too many days to live. That muddleheaded ruler will soon open him up with a saber.”

Gui Xiliang snorted disdainfully, “Your dead character has never changed. Yuwen Huaji basically never has any regards toward that muddleheaded ruler; before his death, Bangzhu had a very good relationship with him, he even said that Yuwen Huaji even dare to steal the muddleheaded ruler’s women.”

Kou Zhong’s countenance changed, “Do you know which one he stole?” he asked.

“Naturally the most beautiful one,” Gui Xiliang replied, “Otherwise, why would he risk his life to steal her? Do you think he dislike having a long life?”

Kou Zhong groaned inwardly; the most beautiful women by Yang Guang’s side were Xiao Fei and Zhu Fei [reminder: fei means imperial concubine]. Zhu Fei was Baling Bang people, so there shouldn’t be any problem. But if it were Xiao Fei, then Yuwen Huaji should know that he and Xu Ziling have come to Jiangdu especially to do harm to him.

The more he thought, the more he was alarmed; no longer in the mood to chitchat with this guy, he hurried away.

Xu Ziling was waiting for Kou Zhong, empty-handed. The latter asked in surprise, “The clothes?”

Xu Ziling indignantly said, “All satin garments and used clothing stores have been looted bare; they all closed down their businesses for good. Everybody said that wherever the muddleheaded ruler went, there wouldn’t be law and order in that place. Failing the people’s heart like this, I really wish to kill him with one punch. Huh? Why is your countenance so unsightly?”

Kou Zhong craned his neck out to look around, a squad of Sui troops has just passed by. Lowering his voice he said, "Did you see anything different about those Sui troops?"

Xu Ziling thought he was still referring to the men that Dugu Sheng sent to catch them. "Nothing different to me," he replied, "In my opinion, currently the morale of the troops is in a mess, even if there is any order from above, they won't necessarily do it wholeheartedly."

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "What I am worried about is not that matter, rather, Yuwen Huaji might have received information about his unfavorable situation. Quick! Let's go find Su Jie, I'll tell you along the way!"

Xiang Yushan proved himself to be a scholar of ability and wisdom; the safe house was at the outskirt just south of the city, not far from the Yangtze River. If any problem arose, it would be very convenient to escape either via the water or on land.

On the outside, it was no different than an ordinary family mansion, but it was actually Baling Bang's secret hideout.

By the time the two boys stepped into the courtyard, they immediately felt something was unusual. One of Baling Bang leaders told them in low voice, "Dugu Sheng and Fei Yun are here."

Kou Zhong had already guessed that they would, so he simply laughed aloud and calmly and boldly he strode into the hall.

Xu Ziling, who was following behind him, had a strange feeling; formerly this good brother of his was just a kid, but facing such a tough enemy he had shown his able side.

Dugu Sheng grandly sat in the middle of the hall, on his side were Xiang Yushan, Susu and Big Sister Xiao, on the other side was the ill-countenanced Fei Yun. Only Yun Yuzhen was not present.

On either side stood five, six big men wearing embroidered robe, with just one glance it was clear that these men were martial art masters of the Imperial Bodyguards.

Dugu Sheng's eyes were flickering sharply as he shouted with heavy voice, "What do you two think you are doing?"

Kou Zhong leisurely halted his steps, his eyes swept across the hall, and he giggled and said, "We, two brothers, also want to know what do you think you are doing? You lightly scolded us as slaves, and locked us up as prisoners. Hey! Let's have everybody judge fairly between us."

Xiang Yushan cast a deeply concerned glance toward Susu, who was so scared that her face was devoid of any color; he stood up and said, "It's good that Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong came back, this is just a little misunderstanding. Come! Sit down and let's talk."

Fei Yun was putting on an air of big official; he slapped the armrest and shouted, "What misunderstanding? Yushan, you sit down, let's clear up this matter first."

Noticing Susu was scared, Xu Ziling empathized with her; letting out a cold laugh, he said, "I don't understand why you are still nagging endlessly; the smart thing to do right now is immediately slip away, if you tarry much longer, I am afraid it will be too late."

Dugu Sheng understood his implication, he raised his hand to stop Fei Yun, who was about to flare out in anger, and spoke in heavy voice, "Can Xu Xiongdi speak a bit more clearly?"

Kou Zhong spoke up, "I just heard information that one of His Highness favorite concubines has secret ties with Yuwen Huaji. Therefore, our secret plan is no longer a secret. If you were Yuwen Huaji, what would you do?"

Everybody's countenance changed immediately.

Suppressing his anger, Fei Yun asked, “Where did you get the information from? Do you know which imperial concubine?”

“From Zhuhua Bang people,” Kou Zhong replied, “I heard that the late Bangzhu was Yuwen Huaji’s man, and that’s how I learned about the incident.”

Fei Yun was seething with anger, “Turns out it’s that thief who did not know how to appreciate favors.”

From the tone of his voice, it was obvious that if the death of Zhuhua Bang’s late Bangzhu was not directly related to him, he must have had some connection with it.

Dugu Sheng turned to one of his men, “Zhu Ming, did you see anything unusual with Yuwen Clan’s troop’s activity today?”

The tall and thin Zhu Ming shook his head and replied, “We have been closely monitoring Yuwen Huaji, Yuwen Shiji and Yuchi Sheng’s men, we did not see anything unusual.”

Dugu Sheng breathed a sigh of relief; he said, “Wind from an empty cave cannot be without any cause. Moreover, Yuwen Huaji has always had free access to the Imperial Palace, so this matter is highly possible. Fortunately, Laofu [lit. old man, referring to self] has been well-prepared; in the next two days, I have strict order that no one is to leave the Palace ...”

Xu Ziling cut him off, “Now it’s not the time to comfort ourselves; didn’t you see that last night our men managed to slip out of the Palace? If one of those men cast his lot with Yuwen Huaji, plus the secret information from that unknown imperial concubine spy, Yuwen Huaji should have a clear picture of his unfavorable situation.”

Big Sister Xiao joined in, “Who currently holds power over the military?”

Dugu Sheng replied, “All His Highness’ personal bodyguards have been with Laofu for many years, more or less there shouldn’t be any problem. However,

whether they are harboring some disloyal thought, or perhaps they have been bought, even Laofu does not dare to guarantee.”

Fei Yun added, “Other than personal bodyguards, there are also Jiangdu’s own garrison and the Imperial Guards that are coming with His Highness. The former is under Yuchi Sheng’s command, the latter under Sima Dekan. Yuwen Huaji and Yuwen Shiji do not have direct authority over military affair.”

The tone of his voice softened as he said, “This official is slightly mistaken, hereby I sincerely apologize to two Xiao Xiongdi. This matter should not be delayed, we must take advantage before Yuwen Huaji finds out about it to strike first and gain the upper hand; pull the Yuwen family’s root from Jiangdu, otherwise it will cause no end of trouble. Would two gentlemen immediately come with this official to have an audience with His Highness? His Highness’ sacred self has already returned to the royal city.”

Xiang Yushan also urged, “Two Dage must use this opportunity to avenge your benevolent master’s big enmity, before Yuwen Huaji finds out about this matter, act fast; otherwise, if you miss this opportunity, there won’t be any second chance.”

Kou Zhong spoke indifferently, “So there is really no sign of troop movement or any rebellion?”

Hearing the tone of his voice, everybody was startled.

Susu could not help asking, “Xiao Zhong, what do you have in mind? Quickly speak up!”

Xu Ziling’s intelligence was on par with Kou Zhong, he understood immediately. “How many men did Sima Dekan take to pursue Dou Xian? When did he leave?” he asked.

Dugu Sheng was shaken, “Do you think he is going to rebel?” he asked.

Kou Zhong said, “Soldiers and officers ran away, he will take the blame. Does

he have good relationship with Yuwen Huaji?”

Zhu Ming’s countenance changed; he said, “Before Commander set off this morning, he stopped by Zongguan mansion to see Yuwen Huaji and Yuchi Sheng.”

Fei Yun stood up abruptly. “That’s not right!” his voice trembled, “He has no reason to bring twenty-thousand men just to pursue Dou Xian’s several hundred men.”

Xu Ziling said, “His pursuit of Dou Xian is just an empty threat. In my opinion, no later than tonight, he will lead the troops back to join Yuchi Sheng and Yuwen Huaji’s troops to kill their way into the Imperial Palace.”

Fei Yun’s countenance became extremely unsightly, “This is extremely urgent,” he said anxiously, “We must enter the Palace immediately to report to His Highness.”

“Hold on!” Kou Zhong shouted, “We are willing to accompany you braving this danger, but you must let our Jiejie leave Jiangdu first, so that we won’t have any fears of trouble in the rear.”

Dugu Sheng and Fei Yun exchanged glances; they hesitated and were unable to make decision. Without Susu, if these two boys employed some tricks and slip away again, they would have no way of finding them back, plus currently time was not on their side.

“No!” Susu mournfully said, “I will wait for you and we will leave together.”

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, “Then if something bad happens, nobody will be able to leave. I am afraid that for Yuwen Huaji, this house is no longer a secret.”

Xiang Yushan patted his chest as a guarantee and said to Dugu Sheng and Fei Yun, “My two Dage are men who dare to do and dare to take responsibility, plus they have deep enmity against Yuwen Huaji. Two Daren can rest assured.”

Dugu Sheng reluctantly nodded his approval.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling bade their farewell to Susu. Only after handing her over to Xiang Yushan did they enter the 'How do you catch the tiger cub without entering the tiger's lair?' frame of mind, and followed Dugu Sheng and Fei Yun back into the city.

Book 6 Chapter 5 – The Muddleheaded Ruler's End Of The Road

Yu Shiji intercepted them in front of Yangsheng Hall, Yang Guang's personal chamber. With bitter and paled face he said, "We cannot have an audience now, His Highness is sleeping."

Fei Yun anxiously said, "Saving people is as urgent as fighting fire; can't we have Madame Gui'er [lit. imperial concubine] think of a way to wake him up?"

Yu Shiji sighed and said, "I have talked to Madame Gui'er earlier, she said His Highness did not sleep at all last night, he went up the dragon bed to rest only a moment ago. Just who do you think will have the guts to disturb him?"

Dugu Sheng also panicked, "What should we do then?"

After exchanging a glance with Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong calmly said, "Yu Daren, is it possible to ask Madame Gui'er, why did he stay up all night?"

Yu Shiji understood his meaning; he went into the palace hall again.

Dugu Sheng helplessly said, "It looks like we'll have to ask two Xiao Xiongdi to be a bit more patient and wait!"

Xu Ziling said, "Just don't watch over us like prisoners."

Fei Yun also beseeched them, "Of course not," he hastily said, "As long as two

gentlemen do not leave the Palace gate, you can do whatever you like to do.”

Dugu Sheng still did not feel reassured, he beckoned a young man from among his subordinates and introduced him to them, “This is Laofu’s [paternal] nephew, Dugu Xiong, let him accompany you strolling around!”

Xu Ziling remembered something; he said, “We have a friend who was enlisted to be a cook in the Palace, we want to ask a favor on his behalf, to have him return to his hometown and reunite with his family.”

Fei Yun’s mind was already someplace else; a bit impatient, he said, “Such a trivial matter, Xiao Xiong [little Xiong] can do it for you.” Finished speaking, he and Dugu Sheng went their separate ways.

This Dugu Xiong was approximately two, three years older than the two boys, his appearance looked quite good, his brows and eyes astute. “Shall we go to the kitchen first, then?” he inquired, “With Yu Daren in charge, nothing is impossible.”

“In that case, Dugu Xiong [this time it is ‘brother’ Dugu] please lead the way,” Kou Zhong said.

Dugu Xiong led the way. Whenever they encountered palace maids and beautiful servant girls, no one did not stare at Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, two boys. With a hint of envy Dugu Xiong laughed and said, “Looks like Kou Dage and Xu Dage are extremely popular with the ladies.”

Very proud of himself, Kou Zhong laughed and said, “How long have Dugu Xiong entered the service as His Highness personal bodyguard?”

“Not even two months,” Dugu Xiong replied.

Xu and Kou, two boys’ hearts were shaken, thinking that in order to overthrow the Yuwen Clan, the Dugu Clan had the martial art masters in their whole nest to come out and have them transferred to Jiangdu. Maybe after rooting out Yuwen Clan’s influence, their next target would be Yang Guang.

After exchanging some greetings with a group of patrolling guards, Dugu Xiong said in a low voice, “I heard two gentlemen have defeated Yuwen Wudi, is there really such thing?”

Kou Zhong said in his heart, ‘Not only Yuwen Wudi was beaten and fled, even your family’s Dugu Ba was injured by Xiao Ling, yet you, this kid, still dare to be skeptical.’ However, his mouth said, “It’s just exaggerated rumor! The fact was that we were just lucky to escape alive.”

“That was quite remarkable,” Dugu Xiong said.

Xu Ziling seldom saw Kou Zhong made modest remarks; inwardly he praised him for being more mature than before.

Passing the imperial garden at the southeast corner of the Chambers of Imperial Concubines, the aroma of meat and vegetable dishes and cooked rice assaulted the three men’s nostrils.

Dugu Xiong said, “Please wait here for a moment, let Xiaodi get Lu Gonggong [term of respect to address a eunuch], the kitchen manager, so that gentlemen can ask him directly. As long as he knows that gentlemen are Yu Daren’s men, I guarantee he will do his best to help.”

After Dugu Xiong left, Kou Zhong said, “Chen Laomou [see Book 2, Chapter 10, ‘Grandpa Chen’] said: any imperial palace must have underground secret tunnel. We’d better try to find one, so that in time of emergency we can slip away a bit quicker.”

Recalling the dreadful situation when Li Mi attacked the Big Boss Mansion, Xu Ziling shivered inwardly. “How are we going to do that?” he asked.

Kou Zhong pondered, “Do you remember? Chen Laomou said that all tunnels must have ventilation. Inside the building, the outlets will be easy to conceal, but in open space, in the garden for instance, it will be easy to find. Ha! Of course Yang Guang built the tunnel for his own use. Therefore, as long as we are looking around that imperial garden just now, we’ll definitely find some tiny traces [orig.

spider's thread and horse track]. And then when something bad happens, we'll flee from that tunnel!"

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "Your speculation, I agree one thousand percent. But since Xiao Fei might be the enemy's spy, chances are Yuwen Huagu also knew about this secret tunnel. If we rush in and Yuwen Huagu waited at the exit and smoked us, we will be choked to death."

Kou Zhong slapped his forehead. Dejectedly he looked at the magnificent scenery around the palace halls. Lowering his voice, he said, "You are right, flying to the heavens we don't have the skill, fleeing to the earth we might meet dead end, the only way is to do it like the last time, find a place where we could hide for d@mn several days. This place is at least ten times bigger than the Big Boss Mansion; it should be easier to find a hiding place. But we must be careful lest Yuwen Huagu set the Palace on fire to vent his anger."

Xu Ziling laughed and said, "If the sky is falling, we'll spread it out as our bedding. When the time of soldiers mutiny and troops rebel really comes, Yuwen Huagu will definitely deal with Yang Guang first, we will then take the opportunity to kill our way out of the siege. Don't forget that we are now martial art masters."

Kou Zhong roared in laughter, "I almost forget!" he said.

A smile escaped from the corner of Xu Ziling's mouth, the scene from their childhood years seemed to reappear. In those days they were both open and candid, sometimes they would argue about a small thing over many days, but they would also burst in laughter for no apparent reason at all.

Kou Zhong said in low voice, "They are here."

Xu Ziling had already heard the footsteps. Dugu Xiong's footsteps were steady and even; not only his foundation solid, the path he took in training martial art was also of the profound, powerful and bold style.

That Lu Gonggong's footsteps, on the other hand, were floaty, plus his left leg was a bit longer than his right, so one was heavy the other light, his center of

gravity was a bit off.

Thinking to this point, even Xu Ziling himself was wondering why he could conjure up conjecture that many things purely based on one's footsteps. If his skill improved some more, perhaps he could grasp even more things.

A person can always put an act, but the sound of his footsteps oftentimes can reveal the actual facts.

From a distance Kou Zhong already saluted and said, "Wishing Lu Gonggong good fortune, Xiaozi [I, the little one] Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling, came with a specific purpose in mind to wish Lu Gonggong good health."

Lu Gonggong, whose head looked like a snake's head and whose eyes looked like rat's eyes, smiled creepily and said, "We are all brothers, there is no need to stand on ceremonies, simply tell me what you need."

Looking at him, Xu Ziling immediately lost his appetite, but on the surface he still maintained cordial expression; extremely deferential, he said, "How could we dare to tell Gonggong what to do? We only want to ask Gonggong about certain fellow by the name of Feng Qiang."

Seeing Lu Gonggong's blank expression, Kou Zhong explained, "He is a short and stout fellow, about forty, formerly opened up a stall at the eastern city market selling steamed stuffed buns; very famous."

Lu Gonggong sighed and said, "I remember now, he had a beautiful mistress! Ay! Too bad he died."

"What?!?" the two boys' voice cracked.

Lu Gonggong put on a grieving look on his face, he said, "That guy was bull-headed, he frequently argued with the other people in the kitchen, someone framed him up by putting some two-fen long [approx. ¼" or 6mm] sharp fishbone inside the steamed buns served to His Highness, implicating a lot of people that even I nearly suffered several floggings. Along with him, more than

300 people were beheaded, most probably the fellow who framed him up was also among those people. Ha! It's really preposterous."

Xu Ziling's handsome face turned white. Kou Zhong hastily asked, "How about his mistress?"

Acting as if he has seen through the worldly affairs, Lu Gonggong sighed and said, "When His Highness wanted to kill someone, when was the last time he did not have the entire family executed? Oh! No! I heard that Feng Qiang's pretty mistress was given to someone who took a fancy on her, thus she escaped the tragedy. As for the particulars, I know nothing about it."

Dugu Xiong asked, "Who might have information about this matter?"

Lu Gonggong laughed creepily and said, "Naturally the guy who was in charge of the execution, Dou Xian."

The three men looked at each other in dismay. Dou Xian already fled out of the city, how could they find him to ask about this matter?

They waited until afternoon that day before Yu Shiji sent someone to tell them that they could see Yang Guang now.

Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling two steps back; he said, "This muddleheaded ruler will kill people as soon as he is unhappy. If something happens, we split up and run away first, and meet again at the pagoda on the southeast corner. If necessary, we could jump down from the pagoda into the moat outside the city wall, and escape underwater."

Xu Ziling was emotionally moved, "That is really the best thing we can do under the circumstances," he praised, "You, this kid, have made a lot of progress."

Kou Zhong proudly said, "We also have a bit of luck; because of that scoundrel Li Butong's messing up, we did not need to heal that Xiang kid's illness, as a result, we now have more bargaining chip to control that Xiang kid. Otherwise, we would not feel comfortable letting him take Su Jie away."

Xu Ziling casually asked, “Did you ask where Yun Yuzhen went?”

Kou Zhong lowered his voice, “My guess is that Dugu Ce is somewhere nearby, hence she went to have a tryst with him, and did not have enough time to come back this morning. Of course! She never expected that we would leave Linjiang Palace.”

“And you are still this happy?” Xu Ziling asked in amazement.

Kou Zhong glowered at him; he irately said, “I am not going to marry her, why should I be unhappy? I really don’t care. Ha!”

Dugu Xiong cleared his throat and turned around, “His Highness does not like people making an unnecessary racket. Gentlemen ... hey!”

Kou Zhong pretended to be surprised, “Of course! Other than His Highness’ own dragon voice, ha!”

Xu Ziling said in low voice, “Our current business is urgent!”

The Emperor’s Private Chamber Palace in sight, Fei Yun was waiting in front of the Palace’s gate, beckoning them to come faster.

The three men unleashed their qinggong to fly over. Fei Yun’s expression looked heavy; he said, “Your guess is not bad, Madame Gui’er said that last night His Highness was pestered by Xiao Fei in some kind of game so that in his excitement he did not sleep a wink. I just now remembered that when I made my report to His Highness yesterday, this s1ut also deliberately teased His Highness by kissing him, so that His Highness did not hear what I said.”

Kou Zhong said, “In that case, I am sure that Yuwen Huagu will make his move tonight.”

“Have you found Sima Dekan’s troops?” Xu Ziling asked, “Are they nearby?”

Fei Yun shook his head and said, "After his troops left the city, they disappeared, making me very nervous. Ay! I was so busy looking for women that I did not have time for anything else."

Xu Ziling's countenance changed, "How could you do such thing that offends Heaven and reason?" he said.

Fei Yun was about to flare-up, but he struggled hard to press down his temper. With a wry smile he said, "I just went to the prison to look for some female prisoners so that if His Highness is excited and want to see it, I will have somebody to hand over to him. This is called 'looking up to peek into the superior's emotion'; otherwise this official's head would have been separated from its body." [Translator's note: I am not sure about this part, I simply translate it as is. I am sure it is referring to something else, but for the life of me, I can't remember. EDIT: I just remember something: could it be that it was a reference to Fu Junchuo?]

Full of regret, Kou Zhong said, "His Highness memory shouldn't be too good; perhaps he has already forgotten about it."

Fei Yun agreed, "He often forgets things," he said, "But I am afraid that as soon as His Highness sees you, he might recall this matter. If he asks about it, it will be terrible!"

"What are we waiting here?" Xu Ziling said, "Time is of the essence here."

With a bitter expression Fei Yun said, "His Highness and the Imperial Concubines are taking a bath at the Long Life Pool, and then after they are done, they will eat something first, and won't be ready in one or two sichen. Even if we get in we will still have to wait. Very well! Please follow this official."

Seeing Fei Yun's attitude to them was a lot friendlier, although knowing it was a fake, Kou and Xu, two boys felt a lot better; they followed him into the main hall of the Emperor's Private Chamber Palace.

It was the first time the two boys saw such a splendorous and majestic hall; the carpet underneath their feet was thick and soft, the furnishing was carefully

selected for quality, no expense was spared, the painting and decoration hanging on the wall were all priceless treasures, dazzling to the eyes of the beholders.

Kou Zhong pointed at something and whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "Must be brought down here from Guanzhong, Luoyang."

Dugu Xiong heard him; he nodded and said, "Kou Xiong guessed correctly."

Not a soul was in sight in the Hall, slanting shafts of sunlight came from the western windows; it was a picture of peace and quiet.

On the southern end of the Hall, there was a padded couch carved with dragons and inlaid with gold and silver; naturally it was Yang Guang's dragon seat.

After asking to be excused, Dugu Xiong went out of the Hall, leaving the three men waiting painfully.

Fei Yun was restless; they endured painfully for a couple of sichen until the sun was starting to go down before Yu Shiji came in a hurry to announce the good news, "They are done! His Highness is putting on clothes, Madame Gui'er has persuaded His Highness to receive us."

The three men had already stood up, hearing him, they sat back down dejectedly.

A moment later palace maids came in to light the dozen or so palace lanterns hanging all around the Hall; they also closed the doors and windows, and lighted the fire stove at the four corners of the Hall. And then Yang Guang's procession arrived.

Several dozen eunuchs and palace maids trooped in and divided themselves into two rows. After a moment of commotion, they all stood erect and waited.

And then Dugu Sheng walked in, leading a large number of Imperial

Bodyguards to guard all the entrance and exits. After everything was in place, he whispered to the four men, "I am sure Madame Xiao is our problem; just now she was pestering His Highness to go to Linjiang Palace to watch the sunset. Humph!"

"His Highness is here!" Fei Yun hissed.

They heard the sound of drum and music from far away. With palace maids and eunuchs leading the way, Yang Guang, accompanied by more than a hundred imperial concubines, leisurely came in. He and Xiao Fei and Zhu Fei were riding on plush sedan chairs, which were carried by strong porters; even their leg muscles were saved.

Everybody crouched down on the floor to welcome this muddleheaded ruler's sacred self.

It was not until Yang Guang half reclined on the couch and all the imperial concubines were sat properly around him that everybody chanted 'long live'.

As if he did not see Kou and Xu, two boys, Yang Guang heaved a deep sigh and said, "Zhen knows that there are a lot of people out there who are fighting for Zhen's title. Ay! If worst comes to worst, I want to be like Chen Houzhu, who, after the country fell, he could be Duke of Changle, and continued his drinking party."

Everybody was stunned; why did he make such an ominous talk?

Xiao Fei, who sat on Yang Guang's right, laughed tenderly and said, "Your Highness is really talkative; some people always exaggerate about those mobs; Your Highness must not believe every word they say."

Dugu Sheng said in low voice, "Just now under King of Yue, Dong Zhi's order, Yuan Shan submitted urgent dispatch, saying that Li Mi is leading million troops, advancing toward the eastern capital, that he already occupied Luokou Storehouse; asking His Highness to respond immediately, otherwise the eastern capital will fall."

It was new information to Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling.

To their surprise, however, Yu Shiji proudly said, “Fortunately this official responded quickly; saying that if that thief’s power were really that great, Yuan Shan would have been killed along the way, how could he have reached Jiangdu? Therefore, on behalf of Your Highness, I already drove that fellow away.”

Hearing that, Kou and Xu shook their head and sighed. Since there really was an emperor like this, naturally there would be treacherous court official like that. If Yang Guang was unwilling to face the fact, how could he believe Yu Shiji’s blatant lie?

They heard Yang Guang’s voice, “How’s the situation of the robbers outside? Fei Dafu [senior official], give Zhen the truthful report.”

Calm and composed, Fei Yun bowed and said, “Your Highness please understand, the robbers’ strength is decreasing day by day.”

Yang Guang sat up straight; frowning, he said, “Decreasing by how much?”

Inventing crazy nonsense, Fei Yun said, “Only ten percent of their former strength.”

Yang Guang breathed a sigh of relief. As if he had just remembered something, he asked, “Yuan Shan said Tang Guo Gong [Duke of Tang State/Country] Li Yuan is rising in rebellion in Taiyuan; is there really such thing?”

Fei Yun jumped in fright; he dropped to his knees and said, “Nowadays people on the outside often deliberately start rumors and create trouble; let Weichen [this humble official] investigate clearly, and then submit report to Your Highness.”

A cold humph coming from the palace gate, followed by a shout, “Liar!”

The crowd was startled; they all turned their eyes toward the voice. To their shock, they saw Yuwen Huaji in full military attire striding in. On his side was a

lofty, handsome middle-aged man.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's eyes immediately shot out deep hatred, but at the same time they cried out in their heart that the situation has turn to the worse.

Dugu Sheng, Fei Yun and Yu Shiji's faces immediately turned colorless. They have already ordered their people that if Yuwen Huaji and his cronies wanted to enter the Palace, they must obtain their permission first, yet right now they did not hear anything until he appeared in their presence; therefore, it was very clear that the situation was far from good.

It was only now that the Herald at the door announced, "Right Guard Garrison General, accompanied by Junior Supervisor, is seeking audience with the Emperor."

As if they did not see Fei Yun, Kou Zhong, and the others, the two men walked into the middle of the palace hall. After kowtowing and paying their respect to the Emperor, they straightened up and stood facing the people in opposition to them.

Dugu Sheng moved in front of Yang Guang. The Imperial Guards at the dragon throne's left, right and rear tensed up.

Yang Guang seemed unaware of the 'swords drawn and bows bent' situation in front of him; he asked in astonishment, "Why did General Yuwen say that Fei Qingjia is a liar?" [Translator's note: according to the dictionary, the term Qingjia (used by the emperor for his subjects) was only used from Tang Dynasty onwards.]

Fei Yun dropped on his knees and cried, "Your Highness, please decide for Weichen, Weichen is loyal and devoted to Your Highness, if there is one word of lie, let Weichen's dead body lie around in the wilderness."

A mocking smile appeared on the corner of Yuwen Huaji's mouth; for the first time he saw Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, a deep, cold murderous aura flashed in his eyes, as he said indifferently, "Previously Du Fuwei was at Shandong, Changbai; now he has reached Liyang. Previously Li Mi barely occupied Wagang, but now

he has Xingyang, and is taking over Luokou. Previously Li Zitong could not be considered anything, but now he is mustering his troops north of Jiangdu, ready to move south anytime. The reason Your Highness has never heard anything of these is simply because you are surrounded by treacherous court officials. There are changes everywhere, you never received the memorials. Thieves are really so many, but someone wantonly lied that their number is decreasing. Since Your Highness heard that the thieves are few, the troops dispatched are not many, hence they are heavily outnumbered. The bunch of thieves' momentum is growing day by day, so much so that Tang Guo Gong Li Yuan rising in rebellion, everybody under the heavens heard about it, only Your Highness is kept inside the drum."

Yu Shiji also dropped down on the floor and cried, "Your Highness, please do not listen to slanderous information, the one rising in rebellion is him."

Yang Guang looked confused; he hurriedly said, "Two Qingjia please stand up first, Zhen will never let you be wronged and suffer injustice."

Yuwen Huaji and Yuwen Shiji let out a cold laugh in disdain. Watching this sight, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's heart sank, realizing that Yuwen Huaji had seized control over the situation.

Fei Yun, two men, were still unwilling to crawl up; they cried even harder, "Yesterday Weichen presented an account book to Your Highness, it was ..."

Yuwen Huaji laughed aloud. "What account book?" he said, "Is it this thing?" He pulled out something from his bosom; it was precisely the account book.

This time even Yang Guang knew that these two men did not come with good intention. "Guards!" he angrily shouted, "Arrest them!"

Amidst miserable scream, the imperial guards by the door fell to the east and collapsed to the west, blood splattered everywhere, a group of men rushed in, led by several men wearing general's armor. These men immediately joined Yuwen Huaji, two brothers, and occupied half of the hall's space nearest to the main door. The crowd of imperial concubines' flower-like countenance turned pale as they scrambled to hide.

Dugu Sheng and his several dozen of Imperial Guards rushed forward and formed a barrier in front of Yang Guang.

Fei Yun and Yu Shiji were so scared that their tears dried out instantly; they crawled and rolled to hide behind Dugu Sheng.

Only Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stood where they were, in the middle between the two opposing troops. Fortunately by this time everybody's gaze was focused on Yang Guang that nobody paid them any attention.

"Sima Dekan!" Dugu Sheng shouted loudly, "Are you rebelling? Still haven't put down your weapon?"

Unexpectedly, Sima Dekan – who was the leader of the attacking troops – laughed and said, "Officers and soldiers are thinking of returning to service, this old general only wanted to submit memorial asking His Highness to return to the Capital. General Dugu's words are too heavy."

Yang Guang stood up. Pointing his finger, he shouted, "Zhen's treatment to you has never been ungenerous, why did you force Zhen doing something that I am unwilling to do today?"

Yuwen Huaji let out a cold snort and said, "Your Highness abandoned the ancestral shrine, traveling all over the place continually: outside, sending military expedition, inside, excessive extravagance, sending the strong to perish under the edge of blades, the old and weak to the gutter, the four citizen classes [i.e. scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants] lost their industries, robbers rise in masses, yet still fully employing traitors to flatter, concealing a fault and refusing sound advice. If you are willing to execute the treacherous court officials by your side, come back to the Capital, Chen ['your servants', used by official when speaking to the emperor] are still willing to vow loyalty and devotion, and will strive our hardest for the imperial court."

Yang Guang's countenance changed. "Indeed you are rising in rebellion," he shouted, "Who's the provocateur?"

‘Qiang!’ Yuwen Shiji pulled the saber hanging on his waist, “The people’s grievance has reached the Heaven, why need a provocateur?”

Yang Guang shouted at the top of his lungs, “Kill them all for me!”

Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling away. Utilizing their power they flew backwards. ‘Bang’, they broke through the window and ‘Crash!’ they landed outside.

Meanwhile the sound of battle inside the Palace Hall shook the heavens, intermingled with the scream and wails of the imperial concubines, palace maids and eunuchs. The chaos was just like the sky has fallen.

Once again Kou and Xu, two boys were caught in the middle of heavy siege.

Book 6 Chapter 6 – Killing Their Way Out Of Imperial City

Before Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's feet even landed on the ground, rain of arrows already shot at them. Evidently other than the Emperor's Personal Chamber Palace, the rest of the Imperial City has noiselessly fallen under the control of Yuwen Huaji and the renegades under his command.

Apparently these hundreds of powerful arrows have been prepared as well; the arrows were hard and accurate, perhaps even Ning Daoqi himself would have to entail strenuous effort to block them.

Greatly shocked, while their bodies were still falling, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling raised their true qi with four palms faced the ground, unexpectedly before they touched the ground their bodies rose high into the air again. Not only they evaded the rain of arrows, they also managed to throw themselves into the cluster of trees in the imperial garden next to the palace hall.

With a loud shout countless renegade soldiers, wearing white band on their heads, charged out of the woods to intercept the two boys.

In an instant the two boys were falling into the enemy ranks and were separated by the crowd.

Outside the woods there were torches everywhere; the battle cry shook the heavens.

After brandishing his fists to knock out two men, Xu Ziling managed to snatch a

long saber. Using the strength of his wrist, he brandished the long saber, a burst of powerful saber qi passed through the edge of his blade, three men fell face up instantly and died on the spot.

Seizing this opportunity, Xu Ziling fled up a tree. He saw everywhere outside the woods were people running and chasing and killing each other, several palace halls already caught fire, thick smoke rose up to the sky, blocking the light from the sun and the moon.

Under the light of the blaze, the Imperial City has become the killing hell.

Two martial art masters from the renegade troops pursued him up the tree, Xu Ziling executed chain-saber technique, blood splashed and the two men dropped dead to the ground.

Under the powerful sound of the arrows, Xu Ziling was unable to divert his attention to look for Kou Zhong. Soaring high to the sky, he unexpectedly broke his own record by crossing a distance of seven, eight zhang, and landed on the edge of the imperial forest.

About a dozen renegade soldiers pounced on him, fast as lightning Xu Ziling darted forward. He tried to avoid being caught in hard fighting. The long saber in his hand flickered like lightning flashes, with unbelievable speed he hacked on three sabers, immediately three more enemies fall face up, they met a violent death. Even he himself was so surprised that his hand could be that formidable.

Two spears attacked from behind, without looking back Xu Ziling swayed left and right, relying on his senses, and dodged the spear attack by a hair's breath.

And then he ducked forward and broke out of the siege.

A harsh shout coming from about thirty zhang on his left. Recognizing Kou Zhong's voice, Xu Ziling knew that Kou Zhong was in danger. His heart was shaken, he could no longer maintain the 'clear water in the well' realm, immediately the spear of a renegade soldier, who had been hiding in the dark, was about to pierce the vital point on his flank.

The instant the tip of the spear penetrated his clothes, Xu Ziling came back to his senses; his tiger body twisted abruptly, his internal energy reacted, the fatal spear thrust slipped away, it only ripped his clothes and scratched a long cut that reached his back.

Flicking his saber, Xu Ziling hacked the renegade soldier's face. With a ferocious roar he swept past a dozen or so enemies. His toes kicked the ground, he charged toward the direction of Kou Zhong's voice.

Under the flickering blaze, a group of about thirty renegade soldiers were engaging Kou Zhong in close fight, one of them was surprisingly Yuwen Shiji. Xu Ziling noticed that for each sword attack from him, Kou Zhong had to strenuously move his spear to deal with it, giving the other soldiers the opportunity to attack.

Xu Ziling also noticed that Kou Zhong's entire body was covered with blood, and that his footwork was unsteady, so he knew that Kou Zhong would not be able to hold on much longer.

Letting out a wild roar, Xu Ziling's saber and body merged into one entity; forgetting any saber technique, he simply brandished his saber in a large saber sweep, like a furious billowing waves of the stormy sea it shot toward Yuwen Shiji.

Yuwen Shiji was just thinking that in two or three more sword moves he was going to take Kou Zhong's life, and then he would turn his attention to find Xu Ziling. Seeing Xu Ziling was coming to deliver his own life, he was delighted; leaving Kou Zhong behind, he turned around to meet Xu Ziling.

Xu Ziling had already thrown the matter of life and death to the back of his mind; his heart and mind were free from surprise and fear.

'Dang! Dang! Dang!' the two men crossed each other in the air and exchanged three moves.

When his sword made contact with Xu Ziling's saber, Yuwen Shiji knew something was not right; he felt that the opponent's scorching hot true qi was

bursting out of the saber and an instant later it attacked his meridians; his own 'Mysterious Ice Energy' [see Book 1 Chapter 1] seemed to be subdued by the opponent's incomparably subtle innate true qi, so that he found it hard to block.

Although his power was far inferior to Yuwen Huaji's, but compared to Xu Ziling's, it was still deeper. Just by taking a mouthful of true qi, he neutralized at least half of the strength of the opponent's qi invading his body. The sword in his right hand executed an exquisite, beyond compare technique, to deflect the long saber sideways, and continued seamlessly to hack on Xu Ziling's neck; only the power was not as severe as before.

Xu Ziling stayed calm without any hint of fear, his left palm stretched out flat, with incredible precision it moved from bottom to top, without even missing a hairsbreadth it landed on the sword's blade and pushed it up.

A whiff of chilliness crept up in Yuwen Shiji's heart; now he understood why Yuwen Chengdu and Yuwen Wudi suffered defeat in these two boys' hands, and why his elder brother Yuwen Huaji repeatedly ordered him not to allow these two boys escape alive from this place.

A sudden gust of wind assaulted his back.

Since the two men exchanged moves in the air, by now Xu Ziling has landed behind him. Yuwen Shiji has never imagined that Xu Ziling's saber would be that fast; unexpectedly without the slightest delay Xu Ziling already launched a counterstrike, swiftly hacking toward his back.

Yuwen Shiji ignored the still surging qi in his body. Clenching his teeth, he swiveled around and promptly blocked Xu Ziling's saber.

'Qiang!'

Yuwen Shiji let out a miserable groan, his mouth spurted fresh blood, as his sword, along with his body, was struck by Xu Ziling's saber that he flew backward until his back crashed against the trunk of a large tree. Injury on top of injury, he slumped down to the ground.

Xu Ziling did not get it easy either, Yuwen Shiji's reaction force jolted his body that his meridians nearly burst and his five viscera nearly ruptured; fortunately he had sustained many injuries in the past that he already knew what to do. The instant before he fell to the ground, he incited the fantastic beyond compare, which can bring people back from the dead, innate true qi from the 'Secret to Long Life', to neutralize Yuwen Shiji's overpowering 'Mysterious Ice Energy'.

'Bang!'

Xu Ziling fell heavily by Kou Zhong's feet.

A hard fight where both sides went full strength like this, victory or defeat was decided very quickly.

Having experienced how formidable Yuwen Shiji was, Kou Zhong thought Xu Ziling was dead. In his fury, with a divine strength, which nobody knew where it came from, his spear thrust to the left and pierced to the right, killing the enemy that they scattered to the east and fell down to the west.

Someone wanted to attack him from behind; Kou Zhong swiftly turned around and thrust his spear. The enemy spurted blood as his body was thrown about a zhang back. The other enemies were intimidated by his power, plus Yuwen Shiji was out of commission, hence they scattered away in panic.

Kou Zhong felt the sky was spinning, the earth went around; he knew that it was because he had lost too much blood and had exerted too much strength. His condition was very close to a lantern which oil was nearly dried up. Letting out a deep sigh, he believed that the two brothers would lose their lives in this place. But suddenly Xu Ziling sprang up and shouted, "Get on my back!"

Kou Zhong was delighted, "Good kid!" he shouted. Casting off the spear, he threw himself onto Xu Ziling's back, and held on to him tightly.

Xu Ziling circulated his qi to force a mouthful of fresh blood out of his system, afterwards the pit of his stomach felt better as his qi was able to flow freely. And then he leaped diagonally up onto a tree branch protruding horizontally overhead first before borrowing the bouncing force of the branch he flew ten

more zhang toward the back of the roof of a two-storied building nearby.

His movement was as fluid as moving clouds and flowing water. By the time the renegade troops wanted to pursue, he, with Kou Zhong on his back, was already at the roof ridge on the other side of the building.

There was a long laughter from afar but quickly coming near. Yuwen Huaji flew over and shouted, "Where do you think you are going?"

Hearing Yuwen Huaji's voice, Xu Ziling knew that if he caught up with them, they would not escape alive. Hastily he jumped down, and landed in the courtyard of the palace complex where the palace maids and the eunuchs slept. Without thinking he ran inside the building.

Yuwen Huaji did not expect Xu Ziling would dare to hide inside the building, he was still flying on the roof, looking for the two boys everywhere.

Inside the building cries of grief shook the heavens, about a dozen renegade soldiers were pressing down several palace maids on the floor, doing their beastly deeds.

Xu Ziling forgot their own safety, he brandished his saber with all his might, killing the renegade soldiers, but those palace maids were already at their last gasp.

Another group of renegade soldiers rushed in. Xu Ziling quietly raised another mouthful of qi to break out through the window, carrying Kou Zhong on his back.

Kou Zhong whispered in his ear, "Pagoda!"

Xu Ziling understood; he dashed toward the hiding place.

By this time most of the buildings in the palace complex have already engulfed in the sea of flame, the only people going back and forth were the renegade soldiers searching for survivors.

Xu Ziling unleashed his consummate escaping skill, fleeing high and ducking low, toward the pagoda on the southeast corner of the complex. The renegade soldiers did see them, but in a flash they already vanished, hence they did not know where to pursue.

Meanwhile Kou Zhong's breathing has become short and weak, his hands and feet lost their strength. Xu Ziling thought fast; taking advantage while the two people's chest and back were pressing against each other, he sent his true qi to enter Kou Zhong's body.

The pagoda was in sight.

Suddenly there was a cold snort coming from behind.

The two boys recognized Yuwen Huaji's voice, their soul flew away and scattered.

Kou Zhong wanted to let his hands and feet go, with the intention of letting Xu Ziling escape alive, but Xu Ziling held on to him tight, while suddenly made a sharp turn sideways to evade Yuwen Huaji's 'splitting the air' palm strike, and then promptly entered a palace building that was still burning.

Yuwen Huaji had just scored a great victory – he killed his mortal enemy, Dugu Sheng, with one palm strike, naturally he was unwilling to follow the two boys taking risk, so he leaped onto the roof of the building, thinking that the moment the two boys going out of the building would be the moment they would lose their lives. To his surprise, however, all he saw was a ball of fire rushing upwards.

Yuwen Huaji stared hard; turned out it was Kou Zhong brandishing a piece of burning beam with all his might. At first glance he thought it was just a ball of fire, so with a long whistle he swooped down.

After receiving Xu Ziling's true qi, which complemented his own perfectly, Kou Zhong was able to recover some of his strength. Upon seeing that, he looked back and laughed, "Yuwen Huaji, nice move!"

Waving his right hand, he transmitted his qi into the blazing beam to create millions of burning fragments raining down on Yuwen Huaji.

If it were only sparks of fire, Yuwen Huaji was definitely more than able to deal with it, but in the midst of the sparks was Kou Zhong's true qi, which was a different story altogether. If because of this he suffered damage on his face, the gain of killing the two boys would not make up for his losses. Therefore, he could only sigh inwardly and moved away to the side.

Just this short delay was enough for the two boys to flee into the bamboo forest under the pagoda.

Wherever the two boys went, fire sprang up everywhere.

Yuwen Huaji was so angry that he spouted smoke through his seven orifices; he knew Kou Zhong set everything in his path on fire, to block him from chasing or intercepting them. Hurriedly he gathered his mysterious power and taking advantage before the fire grew, he rushed into the woods. To his surprise, however, these past several days the weather was dry and the wind was strong, plus Kou Zhong intentionally waved the burning wood around, so that sparks flew everywhere, the fire followed the wind, the wind intensified the fire, in a blink of the eye most of the bamboo forest caught fire. Crackling noise of the fire was everywhere, forcing Yuwen Huaji to make a detour and had to enter the forest in a roundabout way.

The most annoying thing for him was that the burning bamboo created thick smoke, making it difficult for him to estimate the two boys' position.

Suddenly a loud laughter coming from above, Kou Zhong was quacking like a duck as he said, "Yuwen Huagu, we'll let you keep your stinky head for the time being, but just be careful! Don't let anybody else take it before we fight you."

A whooshing noise suddenly filled the air; by the time Yuwen Huaji cried out inwardly, there was a 'splosh!' of the water from the moat just outside the imperial city wall. By the time Yuwen Huaji reached the top of the wall, he saw under the illumination of the blaze that the water in the moat was as flat and smooth as a mirror; the two boys have disappeared without any trace.

Looking back, he saw the entire imperial city was like a sea of fire, thick smoke hid the starry sky above.

“Muddleheaded ruler is dead!”

The entire Jiangdu was boiling.

The big fire of the imperial city painted half of the sky above this great city bloody red.

From time to time renegade soldiers on horseback galloped by and cried out, “Muddleheaded ruler is dead!”

Some people went into hiding in fear; but some others set off firecrackers in joyous celebration. The young and the strong swarmed toward the imperial city to look for Yang Guang’s dead body, they wanted to burn and peel it to vent their anger, or perhaps they were hoping to get a bit of share of the treasure the muddleheaded ruler left behind from the hands of the renegade soldiers.

The official storehouse was broken and looted bare.

Some renegade soldiers even took advantage of the situation to break and enter common people’s houses to rape and plunder, so that a clash ensued. The entire city of Yangzhou was in chaos, Yuwen Huaji and his party were helpless to exercise control over it.

Dripping wet and cold, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had to do their utmost just to crawl out of the moat, and groped their way toward the aqueduct outside the city.

On the streets, mobs of people allied themselves with each other, carrying clubs, staffs, swords and spears; as soon as they saw a Sui soldier alone, they would swarm toward him and beat him up, without the slightest care whether the soldier was actually the hero who had helped killing the fatuous ruler. It was a clear display of their bitter hatred toward Sui army and the government

officials.

Xu Ziling was straining to carry Kou Zhong on his back walking along the street, pushing his way through crowds of spectators bustling with noise and excitement.

A burst of applause and cheers shook the heavens, turned out a squad of about twenty Sui soldiers were being dragged down from their horses by the masses and were beaten half dead.

Kou Zhong groaned, "That section of river course was really hard, and I have no true qi at all; my body feels light and fluttering, and I seem to lose all my strength. Huh? You, this kid, are not injured at all, why does your footstep also seem floaty?"

With a bitter smile Xu Ziling replied, "You have the nerve to say that? You, this kid, is so heavy. You don't know how hard it is to carry you on my back."

Kou Zhong knew that Xu Ziling has exerted too much strength; struggling hard to separate laughter from his coughing, he said, "You, this kid, really know how to crack a joke. Ay! This time we failed to harm Yuwen Huagu, and nearly lost our little lives instead; we are definitely out of luck thoroughly."

Xu Ziling glanced around at the chaotic situation; he noticed that some houses at the west side of the city had just started to catch fire. He said with a heavy voice, "Yuwen Huagu will not benefit too much advantage from this, to control this terrible mess is not easy at all; and don't forget that Ol' Die and Li Zitong are waiting around here, glaring like a tiger watching its prey!"

Kou Zhong's legs gave up, he nearly fell to the ground, his whole body was exhausted as he was holding on to Xu Ziling for dear life. The two boys strained hard just to walk several steps forward; finally they could not take it anymore. Entering a small alley, they sat down on the ground with their backs against the wall.

After catching up their breath, Kou Zhong said, "We might not be able to rely on that water route, can't say for sure, but Yuwen Huaji might be waiting for us

there to walk right into the trap.”

This moment about a hundred or so renegade soldiers arrived; as soon as they saw the armed mob, they immediately attacked. The battle cry shook the heavens, everybody fell over each other whether to evade or to run away. It did not seem like an organized attack, rather, it looked like these renegade soldiers’ spontaneous act of retaliation.

Watching people desperately running to the other end of the alley right in front of his eyes, Kou Zhong’s spirit was aroused. “I dare say that all the city gates are wide open,” he said, “I don’t believe no Sui soldiers will take this opportunity to flee.”

Xu Ziling was trying hard to gather his true qi, but he could not succeed. He mused that if they met even an ordinary Sui troop, they would suffer calamity. Sighing, he said, “So what if the gates are open, do we have strength to walk out? How’s your injury?”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “After we get out of the city, let me, Zhong Shao, strip naked and have you count how many cuts are there on my body, I guarantee it will scare you. Fortunately Laozi [I, your father] have deep power, the cuts can automatically fuse together to stop the bleeding, otherwise I would have died from hemorrhaging alone. The most formidable thing was that b@stard Yuwen Shiji’s sword; he could pierce the true qi protecting my body. But at least this young master returned the compliment by giving him a kick; otherwise, how could you knock him down? Quickly thank me.”

Xu Ziling roared in laughter. “You, this fellow, will never concede,” he said, “Were it not for me, you, this kid, would have become minced meat sauce.”

Kou Zhong joined him in laughter. Wiping the tears from the corner of his eye, he said, “Why is it that even after we failed and were wiped over the floor, and now whether we will live or die is still hard to forecast, we could still be this happy?”

Xu Ziling craned his neck to look at the street where there was no lantern and no burning fire. The chaotic street just a moment ago has become as quiet as the

ghost place, except for unceasing shouting and screaming from the distance. Breathing a sigh of relief, he said, "The reason is very simple: because we are still young. As long as we still have days ahead of us, and we don't die, even if we are a bit late, we can always find Yuwen Huagu to settle the old account clearly."

Kou Zhong acted as if he was deep in thought concerning this matter; and then, propping himself against the wall he stood up shakily, and spoke with determination, "Even if we have to crawl, we have to crawl out of town. If we don't leave now, there is a good chance we will never leave."

Book 6 Chapter 7 – Father And Son Reunion

Stepping into the main street leading to the southern suburbs, the two boys immediately felt at ease. They saw millions of people hurriedly moved in the same direction. People and carts fighting over each other for the right of way, the sound of crying and shouting shook the sky. It was not clear anymore who were the soldiers and who were the thieves, everybody just wanted to rush somewhere else to avoid the calamity.

Xu Ziling was helping Kou Zhong walking through the crowd, groping in the dark, forging ahead. The sky was covered with the thick smoke and the debris blown by the wind from the direction of the imperial city. The grand city of Yangzhou has turned into the terrifying hell of Asura.

When they reached another intersection with a small alley, the crowd ahead of them was suddenly thrown into confusion; they heard someone yelled, “Hear the newly-appointed Commander-in-chief Yuwen Huaji’s order: go back immediately, otherwise you will be killed without any pardon.”

Everybody shouted together; ignoring the order, they walked even faster toward the port. Soon afterwards the flow of crowd was moving freely. Nobody knew where the renegade troops’ captain, who had just made the announcement, had gone to.

Kou Zhong spoke in Xu Ziling’s ear, “This is the power of the masses. As long as you know how to use it, it can display previously unimaginable efficacy.”

Xu Ziling let out a bitter laugh and said, “How about leaving some spiritual talk behind? I am having a hard time helping you walk.”

Before he even finished talking, a crowd of men and women pushed them from behind that they had no choice but to stagger along for a dozen paces. And when they looked up, they were already in the wilderness outside the city.

The two boys followed the tide of people, suffering untold hardships to leave the Jiang County behind, walking along the river toward Danyang. As long as they could find the biggest brothel along the Yangtze River, there was a good chance they would find information about Xiang Yushan, Susu and the others.

Kou Zhong's internal injury was actually rather heavy. Fortunately, after taking a rest in the forest by the road for two days, Xu Ziling recovered his strength first, and then he put his hand to help Kou Zhong treating his injury.

After ten days, the two boys continued their journey. While nearing Danyang, they came face to face with a group of refugees and found out that Du Fuwei's partner, Fu Gongyou has captured Danyang, so that Danyang residents fled out of the city to take refuge in the rural areas and other towns and counties nearby.

By the time the two boys arrived at a little town called Dingshi northeast of Danyang, nine out of ten houses were vacant; a dismal atmosphere just before a great catastrophe about to strike.

After finding someone he could ask, Kou Zhong came back and said, "Turns out five days after Yang Guang was killed, Li Zitong received the news and promptly brought his force to attack Yangzhou. That coward Yuwen Huagu did not dare to meet the enemy, he took a boat and slipped away. I heard that instead of going back to Luoyang, he went to Chang'an."

After laughing aloud, he went on, "This kid still did not dare to be the emperor, he embraced Yang Huang's nephew Qin Wang [king of Qin], and made him the emperor, so they are going to Chang'an to seek only ease and comfort."

Xu Ziling, who was sitting by the well, sneered and said, "The road is long, the soldiers are weary; Yuwen Huaji's reputation has never been good, everyone regards him as the emperor's hunting dog, and now just the evil rebel dogs' master. Basically he does not enjoy popular support. I don't believe he can achieve any great things. Humph! Let's not talk about Chang'an, even if he went

to Luoyang, would Li Mi be willing to let him off?”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Of course he is going to Chang’an! I heard the Li Clan is marching on to Chang’an, I just don’t know whether they won or they lost? That kid Li Shimin is really not a simple person.”

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “Why do you care about so many things? Right now I am most concerned over Su Jie. Danyang is a mess, that need not be mentioned, I don’t know whether they have met some mishaps. Ol’ Die is not a lay practitioner of Buddhism. If he found out that we are in the city, it would not be much different than bumping into Yuwen Huaji.”

Kou Zhong said with a wry smile, “Even if everybody in Danyang has turned into a tiger, we still have to go there; otherwise we will lose contact with Su Jie.”

Having made up his mind, the two boys continued their journey.

The towns and villages closer to Danyang have all become disaster area after the fire. Their guess was that it was all the good craftsmanship of the defeated Sui troops who were running away from Danyang. Just these batches of defeated thief soldiers returning to the north have brought about such enormous suffering to the common people.

The two boys’ heart grew very heavy.

When the city of Danyang was in sight, the two boys discussed the best way to enter the city. Xu Ziling said, “Although Danyang city wall is a bit lower than Jiangdu’s, it is still at least several zhang high. Without hooks and ropes, even if we trained the Bird Crossing Technique for ten more years, we would still be unable to jump over it. So what do we do?”

By this time the two boys’ clothes were soiled and raggedy, their hair messy and their faces dirty. In this kind of critical period, no matter how much money they had, it would be useless.

Kou Zhong has been eating only wild fruits for the last twenty days, he lost the

sense of taste in his mouth already, so he was dying to get into the city. “Nobody would expect we came to Danyang,” he said, “Plus right now we can’t even recognize ourselves. We might as well swagger into the city.”

Knitting his brows, Xu Ziling said, “The city guard is most strict in wartime, my fear is that there will be spies mingling among the people going into the city. If we simply crash in through the gate, I am afraid something wrong might happen.”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Are you forgetting that we are Wulin martial art masters now? If we can’t crash in, we’ll simply run away, and then think of other ways to enter the city. Throw your ghost-headed saber first, let’s go!”

Surprisingly enough, when the two boys entered the city, they saw Du Fuwei’s Jianghuai Army were interrogating everybody at the gate; however, they only asked a couple of questions to the two boys. After finding out that they were refugees from Jiangdu, they simply let the two boys entered without any further questions.

As soon as they were inside, Kou Zhong excitedly said, “Finally our bad luck days are over. Ever since we came to Zhai Rang’s Big Boss Mansion, I don’t know whether it was because we were affected by his rotten bad luck, but we always had bad luck, so much so that we almost lost our lives in Jiangdu.”

Xu Ziling laughed and said, “All Zhai Rang’s people are dead, what else there is to say? You ought to look at it the other way: after so many calamities we did not die, our flood of good fortune is really the same as the heavens.”

Thinking that soon they were going to see Susu, Kou Zhong readily admitted, “Right, right! Our flood of good fortune is the same as the heavens. Oh, something is not right here! Didn’t Xiang kid say that after going into town, we need to walk straight for three hundred steps or so, and then we will see his mother’s something courtyard? We have walked for over a thousand steps, why didn’t we see that ghost signboard?”

Xu Ziling halted his steps in shock, “Oh no!” his voice trembled, “Did you

remember we saw several buildings that were burned through the top? I am afraid it was right there.”

Like a couple little beggars the two boys sat on the street, staring blankly at the passers-by sparsely gracing the street, with occasional Jianghuai army soldier galloping on horseback, yet nobody paid any attention to these two boys. For the last few years there were people fleeing from calamity everywhere, this kind of sight no longer surprised them.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “I really feel like ‘seeing one Sui soldier kill one, seeing two Sui soldiers kill a pair’. If they wanted to leave just leave! No one is stopping you; why would they burn everything before leaving? If they wanted to rob, why did they have to burn and kill?”

Xu Ziling indifferently, “Blaming the Heaven and blaming the Earth is useless. Logically speaking, that Xiang kid is highly intelligent, he must have a way to contact us.”

Kou Zhong dejectedly said, “We have been sitting here for half a day, not even half a person came to contact us. I wonder if we should just wait here forever, or should we go buy some clothes that are a bit brighter and neater, and then find a cure for our hungry tummy, and finally find a place to stay for the night?”

Xu Ziling straightened up and rose, “I know you don’t have the patience,” he said, “Just go!”

Xu Ziling was lying on the bed, practicing his internal energy cultivation. He only stopped when Kou Zhong came back.

This place was not a hotel or an inn, rather, it was a house abandoned by its master, who fled the calamity with his entire family, so that the two boys could use it as their temporary shelter.

Xu Ziling sat up. “Any news?” he asked.

Kou Zhong sat down beside him and said, “I left Beautiful Shifu’s markings all

over the city. If that Xiang kid sees it, he will know that we are here.”

“How’s the situation outside?” Xu Ziling asked.

Kou Zhong shook his head, “Daytime is still all right,” he said, “But as soon as it is dark, everyone is afraid to go out into the streets. The shops are either closed for the day or closed for good. Ol’ Die’s men are truly disappointing, from time to time they break into the citizens’ houses to commit their evil deeds, angering the heavens and grieving the people. No wonder hearing the Jianghuai Army’s arrival, everybody ran away.”

“In my opinion,” Xu Ziling said, “That Xiang kid ought to be gone someplace else with Su Jie. Ol’ Die has so many enemies, Baling Bang could be one. Naturally Xiang kid wanted to preserve his head.”

While Kou Zhong was deep in thought, suddenly there was a knock on their door.

The two boys shivered in fear, they looked at each other in dismay.

Kou Zhong immediately sprang up and said, “Perhaps it’s Xiang kid, because I left secret marks to point out that we stay in this place.”

Xu Ziling was greatly delighted; he dashed toward the main gate, and standing behind the door, he called out, “Who is it?”

No response from the other side of the door.

Kou Zhong had a very bad feeling; he darted toward Xu Ziling and whispered in his ear, “Something’s wrong, let’s get out of here!”

But suddenly they heard a sigh coming from the middle of the hall.

The two boys’ scalp went numb; they turned around immediately, and saw their tall and thin old dad, still wearing his tall hat, with his hands behind his

back, was standing in the middle of the hall, with his face devoid of any expression, he was coldly sizing the two boys up and down.

Among the people that Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling feared to meet, Du Fuwei ought to be on the top of the list; even meeting Li Mi or Yuwen Huaji was not as dreadful.

Thinking that this time Du Fuwei has come prepared, he must have prepared inescapable net before making personal appearance for this father and son reunion, the two boys were groaning even harder in their hearts.

Letting out a dry cough, Kou Zhong said, "This is Ol' Die's territory, just call your men out!"

Du Fuwei could not help laughing, "Good kid!" he said, "Still so cunning. You are trying to sound out what your Ol' Die has prepared this time, aren't you? Let me tell you straight! After receiving the information that the two of you have entered the city this morning, Die immediately rushed for more than forty li nonstop to see you, these two little demons. Right now I don't have even half an attendant by my side. If you want to escape, just escape!"

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "Die is the number one martial artist in the world, you have a reputation to keep, and now your children do not have a single weapon we could lay our hands on; is it possible for Die to give us three days grace period, so that we can make appropriate arrangement, before we and Ol' Die go somewhere out of the city to have a his mother's battle?"

Du Fuwei looked up at the beam; he said indifferently, "I want to speak alone with you, Kou Zhong."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly stunned; they both thought that perhaps he wanted to deal with them one person at a time. But it was unnecessary, because even with the two boys fighting together, to defeat this world-caliber martial art expert was simply lunatic ravings.

Deep in his heart Xu Ziling had a feeling that things were taking a turn for the better. Besides, if they were going to die anyway, there was no harm in taking his

mother's gamble a little bit. Thereupon he nodded and said, "In that case I'll wait outside the door!" Finished speaking he climbed out the window.

Du Fuwei's expression was serene; he sat down in a chair at the southern end of the room and said in a soft voice, "Xiao Zhong! Have a seat!"

A bit flattered by the courtesy, Kou Zhong sat down in an imperial tutor chair [high back with arm rests] on his right hand side.

Du Fuwei was silent for half a day. Finally he said calmly, "Yuwen Huaji has been with Yang Guang for too long, a lot of his bad habit cannot be changed. Going to Peng Cheng, because the waterway is blocked by Li Mi, he has to make a detour toward Chang'an, hoping that he could beat Li Yuan by one step in gaining control over the Capital. Unexpectedly he ordered his men to rob common people's more than two thousand ox carts. More foolishly, he used those carts to transport palace maids and treasures he plundered from Yang Guang's palaces, while weapons, equipment and food provision he had ordinary soldiers to carry on their back, provoking the soldiers that they are rebelling. The leader was precisely Sima Dekan, who once joined hands with him in killing Yang Guang. Although he managed to pacify the rebellion, his strength took a big hit. Ay! Yuwen Huaji has always been known for his wisdom and scheming ability, it's hard to imagine that he would commit such an unwise move."

Kou Zhong did not understand why the vicious and extremely wicked Du Fuwei would want to chat with him; he had no choice but to endure patiently and listen respectfully.

Du Fuwei went on, "His stupidity benefited Li Mi, who had Xu Shiji and Shen Luoyan prepare an ambush at Liyang, and inflict defeat on Yuwen Huaji; countless soldiers surrendered, women, money and goods were lost. Relying on his exceptional martial art skill, Yuwen Huaji led twenty thousand remnants toward Weixian at the north; his reputation will be difficult to maintain."

Kou Zhong blurted, "Won't that mean Li Mi's prestige is flourishing?" He could not help thinking about Li Mi's 'Duke of Pushan's Decree' to have him and Xu Ziling hunted and killed. Their unfavorable situation has made a turn to the worse. Moreover, thinking back to Du Fuwei in front of him, whom he had no hope of overcoming, unless there was divine intervention, there would not be

any narrow and lucky escape this time.

Du Fuwei turned his attention to Kou Zhong; gazing deeply into his eyes, he said, “Between you and Xiao Ling, two boys, I like you, this kid, better. Do you know why?”

Kou Zhong thought that he was being sarcastic; he sneered and said, “Toward Die’s misplaced kindness, Child will be eternally grateful [orig. hard to forget even after one’s teeth fall out].”

A hint of smile escaped from the corner of Du Fuwei’s mouth; he said softly, “Does Child want to know the reason?”

“Speak up then!” Kou Zhong grudgingly replied, “Even if Child does not want to listen, I can’t.”

Du Fuwei did not pay any attention to Kou Zhong’s frigid irony and scorching satire; he said indifferently, “Because you, this little demon, are a lot like me.”

Stunned, Kou Zhong looked at him; for the first time he could feel that Du Fuwei was sincere.

Du Fuwei averted Kou Zhong’s gaze. Looking straight ahead he said slowly, “Yuwen Huaji did not look into the mirror; his martial art skill is abundant, but his popularity is insufficient. When the news of that fatuous ruler got killed reached Luoyang, Yang Shichong [sic, I think it was supposed to be Wang Shichong] immediately threw his support to King of Yue, Yang Dong to be a puppet emperor. Nowadays, whoever has control over the military will have control over the general situation. Otherwise, even if you have unrivalled martial art skill, you will become no more than an outstanding warrior or perhaps super assassin.”

Listening to the implication of what he said, Kou Zhong started to get a feel of the purpose of this one-on-one conversation Du Fuwei wanted to have with him.

Du Fuwei explained further, “Li Yuan can’t be considered anything; however, this dog father unexpectedly begot a tiger cub Li Shimin. In succession he

swindled the Tujue and Liu Wuzhou not to attack Taiyuan, so that the Li Clan won't have fears of trouble in the rear, furthermore, it enabled him to launch sudden attack to defeat Song Laozheng [venerable old man], capture Chang'an, and support King of Dai, Yang You to be the emperor, and nearly angered Li Mi to death."

Du Fuwei's eyes returned to Kou Zhong as he spoke in heavy voice, "Right now the Sui Dynasty's name remains, but the reality is gone. Although one after another their later generations are receiving support to become the emperor, it is nothing more than the final radiance of the setting sun; a little bit of excitement here and there before it is thrown into oblivion. Those with aspiration, who make unifying the world [China] as his mission, who are carrying thousand different schemes, who are surveying the world, other than Li Mi, who could possibly contend with me, Du Fuwei?"

Kou Zhong's tiger-eyes lit up; his eyes exuded incomparable passion, but he did not say a single word.

Boldly and powerfully Du Fuwei slapped a small table by his chair, the solidly built table immediately disintegrated and crumpled to the floor.

Kou Zhong jumped in fright and turned his eyes on him.

Du Fuwei's eyes exuded a spirited ray that Kou Zhong has never seen before. Staring at Kou Zhong, he said, "If you are willing to earnestly and sincerely recognize me, Du Fuwei, as your father, and change your surname to my Du surname, I, Du Fuwei, will treat you like my own, and will help you become the new dynasty's emperor."

Kou Zhong was stunned, "You don't want to be the emperor?" he asked.

Du Fuwei threw his head back and let out a long laugh; he said, "Li Mi wants to be the emperor, Yuwen Huaji wants to be the emperor, Dou Jiande wants to be the emperor, although he has no guts Li Yuan also wants to be the emperor. Everybody wants to be the emperor, but what about me, Du Fuwei? It's only this: with my martial art skill, I am unwilling to be left out."

Kou Zhong looked at him incredulously; he sounded him out, “You are really willing to yield the emperor position to me?”

Du Fuwei replied in a heavy voice, “The fish and the bear’s paw, you can’t have both at the same time [idiom from Mencius]; both are difficult to attain. If I forced you to help me becoming the emperor, someday I will be killed by you. You and Xu Ziling are the type of person who innately unwilling to accept an inferior status. The first time I talked to you, I already knew it.”

Kou Zhong’s tiger body shook severely; he awkwardly said, “If I really admit you as my father, how could I possibly harm you?”

Du Fuwei sighed and said, “In the struggle over the throne, nobody has any relationship with anybody else; compassion, duty, propriety and integrity are totally useless. Those who want to achieve big things do not attach any importance to reality, it’s easy for them to say empty words, and in everything they do, they must be vicious and merciless. The reason why the Ol’ Du thinks highly of you, is precisely because you are that kind of person. You have ambition, and you have the capability. So when everybody in Jianghu say that you are simply lucky, only the Ol’ Du is deeply aware that the two of you are really formidable. Just ask anybody, who has not fallen under your trick and fallen under your control? And who has really been able to deceive you?”

After a short pause, he continued, Xiao Ling and you are two different types of people; even if I killed him, he would never admit me as his father.”

His expression turned serious as he went on, “As soon as you make your decision, we, you and I, have the world in our bag.”

Kou Zhong thought hard for half a day; he suddenly said, “Supposing I am unwilling, are you going to kill me?”

Du Fuwei smiled wryly and said, “Originally I did have such intention, but on second thought, if you are not delighted to do so, later on you will guard against me, and I guard against you, what’s the point in that? But I am quite surprised you asked me that; it seems to me that you are not going to accept.”

Kou Zhong's eyes were gleaming with unusual shine, as if he was entering a beautiful dream world. Brimming with vision for the future, he slowly said, "If I obtained the world by relying on you, Ol' Die, then it's really to unexciting. Yes, I do have ambition to win over the world, but what I am really looking forward to is the course of events. Before achieving the goal, I want to empty-handedly experience the challenge and blood and sweat of invigorating the country. Die, do you understand?"

Du Fuwei straightened up and rose; laughing wildly, he said, "Do you know that by calling me Die repeatedly, you have saved your and Xu Ziling's little lives? Just now I was ready to make my move. So be it! I want the two of you to leave town immediately, I guarantee that no one will stop you. Next time we meet, don't blame me for being ruthless."

And then looking back, he smiled and said, "You'd better find a good place to hide, get out of the limelight and the intensity of the fire; otherwise you would become ghosts who died unjustly under the 'Duke of Pushan's Decree'."

After another loud laugh, he disappeared.

Book 6 Chapter 8 – Total Abandon

The two boys left Danyang city in a hurry, they ran for more than ten li in one breath before stopping on a small hill.

Suddenly there was a crash of thunder, followed by lightning and more thunder occurring at the same time, and then heavy rain started to pour.

Kou Zhong thought he might as well take his upper garment off; standing bare-chested, he looked up to the sky and shouted, “What do we do now? Laotianye [God/Heaven], how about telling me, Kou Zhong?”

Xu Ziling also looked up and opened his mouth wide, happily swallowing several mouthful of rainwater. “Du Fuwei showed considerable respect toward you, why did Zhong Shao let this great opportunity slipped away?” he said, “If only you called him Die, Jianghuai Army is yours.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “This is called ‘no desire for convenience’. Besides, how could it be that simple? Don’t forget that there is also Fu Gongyou.”

Xu Ziling roared in laughter and said, “Don’t like to me, there must be another reason.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “It’s indeed difficult to conceal anything from you. Jianghuai Army’s thief-character is too heavy; bad habits die hard, they are definitely not a good material for the struggle over the world. But the most important reason is that I, Kou Zhong, don’t want others to say that I start my career by relying on the Old Du.”

And then his eyes lit up as he said, "In this world, there is nothing more beautiful than life itself, but life has to have meaning, the beautiful part is the process and the experience. Success or failure is not a big deal, it's the course of events during the struggle that is the most fascinating. My good brother, do you understand now?"

Xu Ziling nodded, "Of course I do!" he said, "But Du Fuwei is also right, you and I are two different types of people, the pursuit of our goals is even more different. Perhaps there will be a day after you obtain the world that we, two brothers, will go our separate ways."

Kou Zhong grew silent. Suddenly he roared in laughter and said, "The encounter of the future is his granny's goddamn business. Right now what do we do? Returning to Danyang is out of question, will we simply lose touch with Su Jie just like this?"

Xu Ziling mused, "The life's encounter is controlled by fate. Although everybody advises us to be a turtle who withdraw its head [i.e. person who refuses to face reality] by avoiding Li Mi's decree to hunt and kill us, but where is the fun in being such people? We might as well look for something we can do in total abandon, so that the world will know. When that Xiang kid hears it, naturally he would want to bring Su Jie to be reunited with us."

'Crash!' A flash of lightning split the sky, painting the heaven and the earth deathly white.

Being at the front seat of the nature's display of power, the two boys were momentarily speechless.

It was quite some time later that Kou Zhong broke the silence, "What are we going to do?" he asked.

Xu Ziling burst into loud laughter, "You are really absent-minded; have you forgotten about the batch of salt we transported the other day? We'll take the goods out and transport it to the northwest region, where salt is most scarce. As long as we can overcome the obstacles along the dangerous and difficult path, if

this mission succeeded, we will become genuine martial art masters.”

Kou Zhong’s powerful body shook. “Good idea,” he said, “We deliberately publicize it along the way, so that whoever wants wealth but doesn’t love his life may either come to get our heads, or deliver his life to us.”

‘Crash!’ The thunderstorm grew more violent.

As soon as the storm lessened up, the two boys immediately set off toward the place they called ‘the training beach’, the place they would never forget as long as they lived, the place that, other than the small valley where they buried Fu Junchuo, was able to stir their emotion the most.

Because this time they were taking land route, they had to speculate a lot along the way, which made their journey slow. However, the two boys did not grow impatient, because their focus was on the martial art training.

By this time the two boys had gained a wealth of combat experience. With the addition of the dreadful threat from ‘Duke of Pushan’s Decree’, plus knowing that this journey of transporting the salt was extremely dangerous, the two boys were very careful and extremely focused. They talked less, and tried as much as possible to avoid entering any village, city or marketplace; they only relied on wild fruits to allay their hunger, without any distraction they trained day and night, leading a rather ascetic life.

Naturally at that time they did not know that this period was where they made an astonishing breakthrough, which laid the groundwork to reach the status as invincible martial art masters in the universe.

One day, because their clothes have been so worn-out that it could not even cover their bodies, they had no choice but to enter a small town to buy two new sets of clothing as replacement.

This southern town did not seem to be affected by the fire of war; it was bustling, flourishing and peaceful. It happened to be some sort of holiday that every household was decorated with lanterns and colored banners, everybody was wearing new clothes, and firecrackers were crackling incessantly.

By nature, Kou Zhong was more inquisitive than Xu Ziling, so he went outside to find out what was going on. When he came back to the inn, he said to Xu Ziling, who was meditating in full concentration, “Turns out this place is under Lin Shihong’s power. This fellow was originally the Er Longtou [second boss] of Poyang Hui [society]. After only a few months rising in rebellion, the Da Longtou [big boss] Cao Shiqi was eliminated by others, giving his cold hand the opportunity to hold some hot fried dumplings. On top of that, because he killed and beheaded Sui Dynasty’s valiant general Liu Ziyi, his reputation soared, attracting his former subordinates so that the number of his men added together reaches more than 100,000. This fellow declared himself an emperor, taking Chu as the name of his dynasty, with Yuchang as his capital. Jiujiang, Linchuan [both are in Jiangxi] and several other large counties have all fallen into his hands. Hey! There are other news, we’d better go to a wine shop and talk it over some big bowls of wine and big chunks of meat.”

Xu Ziling frowned and said, “This past month all we ate was wild fruits, cassava, King Solomon’s seal [Polygonatum], and the like; our digestive system is used to clean and mild food; I am afraid eating meat and drinking wine will make us sick.”

Kou Zhong pulled him up and said, “Exactly for that reason we have to rejoin the world. You, this kid, have the tendency of withdrawing from worldly affairs, which makes me afraid that you might become a Buddhist monk or a Taoist priest. Worse yet, you seem to completely lose interest in girls.”

While talking, he pulled a pair of daggers from his bosom, and stuffed one into Xu Ziling’s hand; he said, “These are very expensive, I bought them from a street vendor, very good steel. The best part is their names, yours is called ‘cutting off jade’, mine is called ‘dispersing gold’, Hui Jin Duan Yu, such interesting and strange names.”

Xu Ziling examined the dagger in his hand; the hilt indeed had ancient seal script engraved on it, ‘duan yu’ two characters. He said, “I don’t like using weapons, why did you give it to me?”

Kou Zhong slapped his back excitedly; with a hearty laugh he said, “It’s for you to shave your beard. Go look into the mirror, see if you can recognize Xu Ziling!”

Xu Ziling still did not understand, “What’s the big deal?” he asked.

“Why you suddenly become so stupid?” Kou Zhong angrily said, “If nobody recognize who we are, then nobody would come to us to settle the debt. If this matter is not elevated, how can we let Su Jie know that we are still in the world of the living?”

Still confused, Xu Ziling followed Kou Zhong’s order and used the dagger to shave his beard. While shaving, he sighed and said, “This is really a treasured blade!”

Kou Zhong had just shaved his face clean, squinting as if he was looking at the bright sun he said in astonishment, “Your, this kid, appearance seems to change, but I can’t tell exactly what’s different. Could be changes in personality traits, like a degree or two of transcending-the-earth refinement?”

Xu Ziling did not seem to care to even look back at him, he spoke indifferently, “You look more like Wulin martial art master as well; you could even scare people without fighting.”

Kou Zhong laughed and cursed, “Get lost, you big headed ghost!” And then he pulled Xu Ziling to go to the wine shop.

The wine shop’s main hall was nearly full, more than thirty tables with only two empty ones. The patrons were mostly traveling merchants or people who make a living as traveling performers, those who wandered the world.

When the two boys stepped into the hall, they immediately attracted the attention of most people, some even looked startled and showed unsure expression.

Kou Zhong swaggered toward one of the vacant tables and sat down. “Get Ol’ Kou two catties of good wine first, I want the top quality ones,” he shouted.

As soon as the two words ‘Ol’ Kou’ came out of his mouth, those several

people were visibly shaken immediately, and their faces looked weird, as if they were delighted.

Xu Ziling saw this, and said in low voice, “Be careful, someone might poison the food and wine.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Don’t forget that a hundred poison cannot invade our body, Shen Poniang’s poison could not do anything to us.”

Xu Ziling irately said, “Even if we can expel poison, it still wasted a lot of effort, not to mention the inconvenience. It is still better to be a bit more careful.”

“There shouldn’t be any colorless, odorless poison in the world,” Kou Zhong replied, “As soon as Laozi give it a glance with my keen eyes, a sniff with my sharp nose, I guarantee there won’t be any poison slipping through my nose and my eyes.”

Although he said that, this kid actually went to the kitchen to personally monitor the server pouring wine. He also ordered some dishes, mainly dumplings with meat filling and green veggies, with only one dish of stewed meat. It was clear that although with his mouth he said all those things, he still took Xu Ziling’s likes and dislikes into account very much.

The two boys acted as though there were nobody else present, they ate and drank as much as they liked. While being tipsy and merry, Kou Zhong said in low voice, “When Li Yuan heard that the muddleheaded ruler was killed, he forced King of Dai Yang You to hand over the emperor position to him. Outsiders naturally say that that child was perfectly happy to abdicate and yield to him. Ha! We have one more emperor coming out.”

“Must be Li Shimin’s idea,” Xu Ziling commented.

Kou Zhong shook his head and said, “Hard to say. I heard that Li Shimin’s older brother, Li Jiancheng is also a formidable character. Another brother is Li Yuanji, his bravery is unrivalled, his martial art skill surpasses his older brother’s. Ay! That Li kid is so pitiful, with much toil he fights over the world, in the end he might only benefit Li Jiancheng.”

Xu Ziling said, “They are hands and feet [fig. brothers] with deep feeling between them, riches and honor will be enjoyed together, why bother about that kind of things?”

A smile of contempt appeared on the corner of Kou Zhong’s mouth, but he did not say anything.

Unlike Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling was concerned about Li Shimin; he said, “How’s the situation in Guanzhong?”

“Guanzhong capital is a piece of fatty meat [fig. cash cow], everybody wants to eat it up. Li Mi and Yang Shichong [there’s this name again, I don’t know whether it was a typo or different character from Wang Shichong] actually had a lot of chances to snatch it away from the Li Clan at Chang’an, but they are curbing each other’s move that in the end nobody could make any move. Do you still remember that guy Xue Ju?”

Xu Ziling’s memory was exceptionally good; he nodded and said, “That was the guy who wanted to copy Qin Shihuang [first emperor, 259-210 BC], that idiot who called himself Xi Qin Bawang [the overlord of the western Qin], right? His dominion Jincheng is west of Chang’an. Do you think he is fighting for food against the Li Clan?”

Kou Zhong said, “Kid, you are so smart that others cannot help loving you, one guess and you hit the target. This idiot claimed to have a hundred and thirty thousand men under him, and looked down on Li Yuan. Unexpectedly he dared to recklessly attack a solid city like Chang’an, and was beaten by that Li kid outside the city, and had to crawl back home before he finished eating, thus his prestige also took a large fall.”

Xu Ziling asked in amazement, “This place is so far away from Guanzhong, how could you describe it with living spirit, living image, as if you have witnessed it with your own eyes?”

Kou Zhong proudly said, “In this small town, at least one out of four people is a refugee from the north. I am just adding a little imagination to that, and you are

listening with smile of exultation.”

Xu Ziling said, “The big battle between Wang Shichong and Li Mi is inevitable, I just don’t know who won and who lost.”

Kou Zhong smiled mysteriously and said, “Turns out you haven’t forgotten Shen Poniang.”

Xu Ziling let out a forced laugh; he said, “You have contracted the incurable disease of using too much imagination. I was only concerned over the situation of the world. If this chaotic situation continues, common people will have to suffer I don’t know how much more pain.”

Kou Zhong said, “Since that muddleheaded ruler’s death, the situation is getting more tangled and complicated. One of the so-called five martial art masters of Sui Dynasty, Shen Faxing, and thus is one strong character outside the Four Powerful Clans who is able to gather his descendants based on surname connection, took office as the Governor of Wuxing. On the pretext that he was attacking Yuwen Huaji, he gathered sixty-thousand Sui troops, to occupy Kunling. His fame and power flourished suddenly, and called himself Jiangnan Dao Da Zongguan [the big steward of Jiangnan (area south of Yangtze River) road], in direct opposition to Li Zitong and our Ol’ Die. These rebel armies, one was originally Sui troops, and the other was originally born from grass and pond, have deep enmity against each other. Water and fire cannot tolerate each other.”

“In that case,” Xu Ziling said, “Li Clan’s victory over Xue Ju is actually a crucial turning point, because from now on they no longer fear threats from the west, and can simply sit and watch the heroes of the Central Plains killing each other.”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, “I know that you always think highly of that Li kid, but he and his brother Li Jiancheng once wanted to attack Luoyang, in the end there was neither accomplishment nor pay back. The current situation is a stale-mate; nobody is able to do anything to the other side.”

Xu Ziling pressed Kou Zhong’s cup down. “Don’t drink too much!” he said, “Something might happen tonight.”

Kou Zhong pushed his hand aside and drained his cup in one gulp. There was an unusual glint in his eyes as he said, "This is the last cup."

Xu Ziling knew that he had evoked the bad memory of Li Xiuning in Kou Zhong's mind. Sighing inwardly, he pulled Kou Zhong back to their room at the inn.

That night indeed there were Jianghu people who acted recklessly by coming to them looking for trouble, but they were beaten to be in a sorry state by the two boys, and ended up running away with broken arms and broken feet. The two boys knew it was only the beginning, so they might as well not hiding their identity, as they swaggered through towns and villages, pressing on toward their 'training beach'.

They were not people who love to flaunt their courage and strength at all, while deliberately elusive, sometimes for two, three days they trained in the wilderness, cultivating the internal energy from the 'Secret to Long Life', baffling those who were trying to follow their trails.

On one hand, they were focused on their training; on the other hand, they wanted to use these endless streams of people – who were coming to their door coveting Li Mi's reward – as their target practice, to see whether the technique they previously learned could be thoroughly blended with what they had just learned, or perhaps with their own interpretation, to become even more comprehensive, to enable them to control the true qi within their body smoothly, and to bring out the innate quality to its extreme saturation.

One day the two boys chatted about making a stop at Yuhang, so they paid taxes as required by the rules and entered the city. Kou Zhong laughed and said, "I wonder if those b@stards Haisha Bang [see Book 2 Chapter 4] still exists? Now that the Yuwen Clan is powerless to defend itself, Haisha Bang cannot flaunt their viciousness. We might as well tear down their Yuhang Division, forcing them to offer us a big ship, with a hundred sailors, a thousand sacks of salt, and ten thousand beauties. Ha! The more I think, the happier I am."

Xu Ziling swept his gaze around, the scene on the streets did not look much different from what he remembered, only there were a lot more Jianghu people

around, but no one dared to look directly at them, obviously these people knew who they were. Some even made a detour to avoid them.

Laughing aloud, he said, “Gain the initiative by striking first, it can really save us a lot of trouble. This place is probably Shen Faxing’s territory, someone who has been a government official is, after all, different; everything in this place is clear and orderly, unlike Ol’ Die’s place that looks like a mess.”

Kou Zhong halted his steps and pointed to a shop across the street. “Do you remember?” he said, “It’s here! Look! Everyone in that bunch of people at the door has ominous glint in their eyes, their expression looks bad.”

Xu Ziling looked over; he recalled Haisha Bang Yuhang Division’s Vice Helmsman Tan Yong, who that night walked out of precisely that place.

Just like that night, about a dozen Haisha Bang disciples gathered in that store, everybody had a weapon in his hand, everybody was glaring at the two boys, as if they were ready to fight at any time.

Kou Zhong said, “That idiot Dragon [King] Han Gaidi [reminder: his real name was Gaitian, tian – heaven, di – earth] must’ve thrown his lot to Shen Faxing, otherwise, I would be surprised if he is not swept out of Yuhang. Shen Faxing made it clear that he is on crusade against the Yuwen Clan; thereby Han Gaidi, who is accustomed to piloting the ship, has a deep understanding on how to steer the rudder by looking at the wind.”

Xu Ziling took the initiative this time, he strode across the street straight toward that store; beckoning Kou Zhong to come along, he said, “Attacking the unprepared is the best policy! C’mon good brother!”

Kou Zhong laughed and followed him, just like they were going to play a fun game.

Right this moment, they both felt that they had grown up to be adults, no longer two young marketplace hooligans.

Book 6 Chapter 9 – Full Display Of Their Capabilities

Those Haisha Bang members were used to bullying, upon seeing this, those dozen or so men stormed out of the shop, carrying sabers and hatchets, to meet the two boys.

Like a tiger entering a flock of sheep Xu Ziling charged into the enemy ranks, punching and kicking. Very soon those bull-like sturdy men were constantly flying off or falling to the ground, so after a moment no one could even crawl up.

The passers-by on the street fell over each other to run away, the situation was chaotic.

Kou Zhong whined, “Can’t you at least leave two for me to play with?” while he hacked and grabbed one of the men, and dragged him inside the shop. Soon afterwards he walked out and took Xu Ziling toward the dock. He said, “Their division headquarter is really at that salt street, adjacent to the warehouse where we stole the salt from. From there it should be a bit more convenient to steal a boat.”

“Did the guy you grab cooperate?” Xu Ziling asked.

Kou Zhong let out a cold humph, “Can he not?” he said.

Xu Ziling laughed aloud, and walked ahead of him out of the city.

About midway, several hundred riders galloped out of the city gate like a

whirlwind. Without even looking they knew that these riders must be from Shen Faxing's army.

Kou Zhong jumped in fright, "Looks like they have more people than we can handle!" he said.

Recalling the hard battle in Jiangdu's imperial city, Xu Ziling was rather timid as well; hastily he followed Kou Zhong running into the wilderness.

Xu Ziling lay down on top of a big horizontal branch protruding from a big tree in the jungle by the seaside, enjoying the spectacular scenery of the setting sun in the ocean, feeling that his heart and mind were as broad and infinite as the scenery in front of him, that all the 'you fight, I snatch' of the secular world has turned into a trivial matter that had no place in the grand scheme of eternity.

Ever since he put on brand new clothes and shaved his beard that day, Kou Zhong also seemed to change into a different man, brimming with fighting spirit. While he was in deep contemplation, occasionally his eyes would shine with unusual gleam, although it was not clear whether he was thinking about the struggle over the world.

Xu Ziling himself was more and more intoxicated with exploring the way of the martial arts; other things no longer had any place in his heart and mind. The only thing that he was unable to put down was Susu. As for Kou Zhong, naturally he did not need to worry.

He also remembered Shen Luoyan and Princess Dong Ming. But they were merely like floating light or fleeting shadow, not something that could move him emotionally.

For him, the most unbearable thing in life was feeling. Every time he thought about Fu Junchuo, he was always overwhelmed with heartbreak and depressing feeling, so that his hatred toward Yuwen Huaji grew deeper.

After killing Yuwen Huaji, he would roam the world, even go beyond the Great Wall, to experience the many colors life has to offer.

As for the great undertaking of unifying the world, it was not something that he dreamed of doing; those were things that people like Kou Zhong or Li Shimin should undertake.

His only goal in life was to explore the wonder this world had to offer, to attain the highest level of the martial art world he could achieve, to see through the mystery of life. But he had never forced himself; he always let everything fall into its place at its own time. Just like when Kou Zhong wanted him to eavesdrop the old teacher's lecture, wanted him to stealthily learn martial art, he simply went to listen, to learn. Until he comprehended the immeasurable mystery of the 'Secret to Long Life', he finally grasped the meaning of life in his hand, to have his own way of life and his own goals.

Suddenly alarm went off in his heart.

Xu Ziling closed his eyes. Getting rid of ten thousand thoughts in his mind, he instantly sensed someone creeping toward him from the southwest direction. This person could be considered the best among the martial art masters whom he encountered ever since he left Danyang, but it was definitely not Kou Zhong.

If it were Kou Zhong who sneaked in to play trick on him, he would have to enter the ten-zhang range around him before Xu Ziling could detect his presence.

But this person was still thirty zhang away when Xu Ziling started to sense his presence.

Right this moment, he also detected the enemy's presence from other directions; all were about twenty zhang away from him, thus it was clear that these several enemies were a notch above the first one.

In that instant he made up his mind to fight to the end; otherwise, he would lose contact with Kou Zhong, who went out to scout the enemy positions.

Like a ghost Xu Ziling swiftly slid down to the foot of the tree. Because he had a more accurate picture of the enemies' position and their approaching route, with only one or two shenfa [motion in martial arts] he managed to slip through

the enemy eyes and through the gaps in their blind side into lush underbrush.

The sky was getting dark, the sunrays gradually disappeared on the horizon on the other side of the ocean, the woods grew so dark that it was getting more and more difficult to see anything.

Suddenly there was the sound of rustling sleeves against the wind, followed by someone exclaimed, “Huh?” Apparently he was startled for not able to find Xu Ziling.

Xu Ziling understood; the opponents must have seen him earlier from a distant height when he was lying down on the tree branch, but by the time they went into hiding in the nearby forest, Xu Ziling was already gone.

Xu Ziling crouched low in the grass, narrowed his eyes, held his breath and calmed his qi as he looked out. Unless the opposite party searched to this place, based on his fantastic true qi, they would never find him. In the past, when his cultivation was still shallow, even martial art masters like Li Mi and Zhai Rang were not able to detect his presence as he was hiding on the beam; let alone there were not too many people of Li Mi and Zhai Rang’s calibers in the world, therefore, he was not worried the least bit that his presence would be detected.

Two men in black appeared under the big tree where he lay down in contemplation earlier, one tall, the other short. But because their backs were facing him, he could not see their faces. It’s just that by looking at the ‘deep-pool, towering-peak’ way they were standing, the imposing manner and strength they exuded, he knew that these men were not mediocre masters.

Another rustling of the wind, another person appeared under the tree, and Xu Ziling heard, “I have searched everywhere, there’s not even half a shadow of ghost around.”

This moment Xu Ziling suddenly sniffed an exotic delicate fragrance, followed by a subtle, almost inaudible noise of something splitting the air. Xu Ziling groaned inwardly, knowing that someone was coming from behind, and it was a woman, whose body’s fragrance had already been delivered by the sea breeze into his extremely acute nose.

Xu Ziling hastily crouched down to the ground.

A sword swept past the grass above him, followed by four more; each strike was fast and fierce. If he had been squatting just like a moment ago, he would have been hit by the sword.

The delicate fragrance moved away, obviously the woman had moved someplace else to continue her search.

Xu Ziling snickered inwardly. He sat cross-legged, thinking that Kou Zhong should be back any time soon.

A moment later the three enemies gathered together, two men and one woman; they talked in low voices. Most probably the other person was still searching in the vicinity.

The first to be heard was a man with strong voice, "This is perhaps the best chance to intercept them. Looking at the current situation, it looks like they are going to run away overseas to escape Li Mi's decree to hunt and kill them."

"Where did that kid go?" another man with coarse voice asked.

The first man replied, "Da Zongguan [big/first manager] and Han Bangzhu [gang leader] have already guessed from their route that they were heading this way. This matter is very important to Da Zongguan, otherwise, why would he toil our Xia Xianzi [goddess/fairy/female immortal] to personally come here?" The speaker was a young man, apparently he was trying to flatter that woman.

A burst of silver-bell like laughter was heard, and then that woman, who was known as Fairy Xie said, "In my opinion, he is trying to slip away. We will lay a trap here. Supposing by lucky coincidence that kid Kou Zhong managed to escape Han Bangzhu's inescapable net, we will take care of him here. As long as we can capture one of them alive, the 'Duke Yang Treasure Trove' will be in our, Jiangnan Army's bag."

Xu Ziling was shaken; now he knew why Kou Zhong had not come back yet. Not in the mood to listen further, he quietly backed away.

He had just stepped out of the forest when a shadow flashed in front of him, and he realized he had fallen into a heavy siege. Someone behind him laughed aloud and said, "Kid, you are so naïve, we swindled you a little bit and you fell right into it."

Another man said, "It was not a complete lie either, the other kid might have been captured already."

Xu Ziling maintained his composure and did not show the slightest sign of fear at all, under the dim moonlight he coldly sized them up. Other than four people who appeared first, there were two more people. Every single one of them looked highly capable, obviously these were not ordinary warriors.

The one blocking his way was a scholar with a rather confident and casual demeanor, with a long sword in his hand, which he pointed at him from a distance.

On his left was a bald man, thick and solid like a bull, both his left and right hands carried big hatchets, so that even without any explanation anybody could infer that he was an expert in external skill, the brave-general-who-charge-and-break-through-enemy-lines type of person.

On the far right was a white-haired, dreary-looking, big and tall old man. His sword was still hanging on his back, his manner grave. If Xu Ziling's guessed correctly, of the three men, this man's martial art skill must be the highest.

Suddenly he heard the wind behind him, it was the two men and one woman who had just swindled him, flying over from the forest, blocking all of his escape routes.

One of them laughed and said, "Kid, you missed your last chance! If just now you turned around toward the dense jungle, you might be able to slip away."

These people were saying all these things to attack Xu Ziling's mind; they wanted Xu Ziling to feel foolish and thus disturbed his concentration.

The white-haired old man cupped his fist to salute and said, "Laofu [old man, referring to self] Shen Fazheng, the older brother of Jiangnan Dao Da Zongguan [see last chapter, Book 6 Chapter 8]. If Xu Xiongdi is willing to come back with us, the Ol' Shen guarantees that Xu Xiongdi will be received as our honored guest and will be treated with utmost hospitality."

Xu Ziling stood up straight in the middle of the siege, there was a deep and immeasurable, unusual gleam his tiger-eyes, but his countenance was still and calm like the surface of water without any ripples, his upright body was like lofty mountain that gave others the impression that he would be hard to shake.

The scholar-looking man held the sword with both hands as he saluted and said, "Zaixia Li Changheng from Poyang Pai [Poyang (county in Shangrao, Jiangxi, Sect]. We are very fond of Xu Xiong; if we could exchange weapons of war for gifts of jade and silk, nothing can be better than that."

And then he introduced the bald man, "Tu Li Xiong is Huangshan Pai's [Mount Huang (in Anhui) Sect] martial art master; he is Da Zongguan's Left Vanguard, while Zaixia is his Right Vanguard General."

A tender laughter was heard from behind, the beauty, who was called Fairy Xie, said, "Nujia [your (female) servant] is Xie Yujing, you must not forget it!"

The one called Shen Fazheng smiled and said, "The remaining two gentlemen are the Lian Clan's brothers from Qishan Pai's [Mount Qi (in Gansu)] Sect], Fan Xiong and Chu Xiong; both are martial art experts famous in Jianghu for their whip. In Laofu's opinion, before long their 'Drifting Cloud Whip' will be numbered among the 'Amazing Skill Ultimate Art'."

"Are you done?" Xu Ziling spoke indifferently, "If you are, just make your move!"

The six people were greatly surprised.

It should be noted that none of the six of them was not martial art master with resounding name in Jianghu. Any one of them came out, very few people would dare not to give them any face. This time, under Shen Faxing's bidding, all six of them came out of their respective Sect to deal with these two boys; at that time all of them felt that Shen Faxing was making a big fuss over a minor issue. Who would have thought that Xu Ziling had the impertinence to speak such a boastful remark?

Actually, in Xu Ziling's heart, because he was so accustomed to meet martial art masters, other than Du Fuwei, Madame Dongming, Dongming Princess, Ba Fenghan, and several other martial art masters of their rank, he did not have any regard to other people.

Tu Li roared violently, "This fellow is unable to differentiate good from bad!" Before he finished speaking, his shoulders and arms turned around. Two huge hatchets, which were originally held flat on his chest, hacked diagonally down. These two axes swept down one after another like a swiftly turning wheel. Just this one move has demonstrated that he did not simply rely on brute strength, but that he was a martial art expert who was beautiful inside and out.

At the exact same time, a cold qi was piercing toward Xu Ziling's vertebrae from behind.

Seeing the opponents were this formidable, Xu Ziling's spirit was greatly aroused. He knew that these two hatchets were simply to divide his mind, the real threat was the finger wind attacking him from behind.

The opponents spent this much effort, in the end they merely wanted to capture him alive.

Xu Ziling suddenly moved sideways toward Tu Li's right side. Not only he evaded the sneak attack on his back, by a simple shift like that he was also forcing Tu Li to change his move in panic.

Everybody was shaken.

It was called 'just with one move the expert will know which one was there

which one was not’.

Tu Li was about to twist his waist in a horse stance to continue his attack, Shen Fazheng called out loudly, “Hold it there!”

Xu Ziling halted instantly; he did not even dodge or block the huge hatchet hacking down on him, showing no sign of nerves at all.

Tu Li took his hatchet back in horror, remembering Shen Faxing’s order to capture the two boys alive.

Watching this, the rest of the people wiped the cold sweats from their foreheads, thinking that there was actually someone who had a full confidence on the enemy like that in the world.

Shen Fazheng spoke politely, “There is one thing Laofu would like to inquire.”

Xu Ziling shrugged his shoulders noncommittally. Whether it was his movement or his expression, everything displayed confidence, poise and elegance.

Everybody was emotionally moved; they all sensed the unique gracefulness of this young, new rising star of Wulin who recently shook the entire Jianghu.

Seeing Xu Ziling did not speak, Shen Fazheng had no choice but to go on, “Xu Xiongdi, don’t you want to know what happened to that other Xiongdi?”

Shen Fazheng’s nickname was ‘the blade that attack the heart’. As the name implies, this man was an expert in psychological warfare. Before they even came here, they had already decided that killing Xu Ziling was not a difficult task, but capturing him alive was not an easy thing at all. Therefore, Shen Fazheng designed a variety of psychological attacks to be used as appropriate. Previously, Lian Fan, Lian Chu and Xie Yujing, three people’s attempt to lure him out was his crafty scheme. Shen Faxing was able to rise to his present position, his older brother’s contribution was extremely significant.

However, against everybody's expectation, Xu Ziling did not show the slightest bit of surprise, the corner of his mouth even revealed an extremely touching smile. With that kind of touching, natural expression, nobody would dare to doubt his sincerity.

The three people, who were facing him and watching his demeanor, were suddenly overwhelmed by a very strange feeling, as if they were enraptured by this young martial art master's graceful, elegant and outstanding innate beauty.

Xu Ziling spoke indifferently, "Thank you for your trouble and your concern; unless I see that brother of mine's dead body lying on the ground, I will not believe that anybody would have the ability to ..."

Lian Chu had a fiery temper, plus he did not see that extremely touching smile, so how could he bear it? Flicking his strong wrist, the long whip in his hand struck like a viper toward the vital acupoint behind Xu Ziling's ear. If Xu Ziling were really hit, even if he had the divine skill protecting his body, the whip would have made him lose consciousness for sure.

The reason Qishan Pai's whip technique could dominate the Jianghu was precisely this unique skill 'whip acupoint'. It should be noted that this amazing whip movement could be launched at any angle to attack the opponent, so that it was very difficult to guard against.

Lian Fan and his brother Lian Chu had telepathic connection between them, seeing his younger brother made his move, his whip also moved. His whip suddenly bent in half, making it half as long as the original, but it still had the eight-chi long whip handle that shot forward from his left rear side toward the middle of Xu Ziling's back.

Shen Faxing's Right Vanguard General Li Changheng also made his move; the sword in his hand created a dozen or so sword patterns, blurring the vision of the opponent, and then one pattern suddenly shot out toward Xu Ziling's throat, with incomparable viciousness and ruthlessness, without the slightest bit of reservation.

The Left Vanguard General Tu Li let out a low 'whoo hoo' roar from deep

within his throat, while his pair of huge hatchets was moving up and down. Although he did not make any move, he created a great threat that at least Xu Ziling would not dare to evade on his direction.

Although Shen Fazheng also did not make any move, he exuded an unfathomable-mystery feeling in other people's heart.

And then there was also the threat from Xie Yujing who was standing behind him. Nobody could predict whether she would make her move or not. And if she did, when would it be?

It was the first time for Xu Ziling to face so many opponents of martial art masters with similar skill level; however, amidst the opponents' fierce offensive and seamless coordination, there was one big weakness: they wanted to capture him alive. Therefore, the real threat to him was Lian Chu's whip striking the acupoint behind his ear; the rest of the attacks were only to distract his attention.

If not for the enemies were having this intention, they would have enough power to kill him; however, they would also have to pay a very heavy price.

Xu Ziling's mind entered the 'still water in the well' realms; it clearly reflected the surrounding environment without the least bit distortion, accurately grasped the opponents' movements, the technique and timing of each attack.

The sensing ability of his eyes, ears, and nose was elevated to its limit, even the skin underneath his clothes could generate the response he needed to attain the martial art master's 'knowing the enemy' phase.

With a low groan, with nobody able to see what style he was executing, Xu Ziling's legs suddenly pushed hard, like an arrow he flew vertically straight into the air.

This move was really outside everybody's expectation.

It should be noted that when one was flying into the air, as soon as one's true

qi was depleted, one would immediately fall back down. Moreover, when one was in the air, one's ability to change a move, as well as one's flexibility to defend oneself from the enemy suffered a huge setback, so that one would become the most obvious attack target. Under heavy siege, even less people would dare to try this stunt. Therefore, Shen Fazheng and the others were all taken by surprise.

As if Lian Chu's whip had an eye of its own, it also rose up to chase Xu Ziling. It was due to Lian Chu was still under the effect of his forward momentum, so that momentarily it was difficult for him to pull back, so he might as well continued his whip to chase after the sole of Xu Ziling's feet, relying on his a zhang and a half long whip, trying to attack this young adversary.

Both Li Changheng's sword and Lian Fan's 'whip stick' struck empty air.

From behind, the 'Flying Fairy' Xie Yujing let out a peal of tender laughter, while like a wisp of smoke she also flew diagonally up into the air, chasing after Xu Ziling, whose speed kept increasing. The pair of daggers in her hand swiped toward Xu Ziling's neck and waist; it was vicious and merciless to the extreme.

Just now, when Xu Ziling threw a glance to look at the enemy's situation, he only saw five people; she was the only one missing. Therefore, it could be clearly seen how superior her lightness skill was. Afterwards, he also sniffed her bodily scent carried away by the breeze, so he knew that she was closing in on him fast. Clearly she obtained her 'Flying Fairy' nickname not by a fluke at all.

It looked like Lian Chu's long whip was about to hit the yongquan [lit. gushing spring] acupoint at the sole of Xu Ziling's foot, so he was ready to send his energy via the whip. Who would have imagined that using a very simple footwork, Xu Ziling used the tip of his toes to meet the tip of the whip?

'Whap!' Two streams of energy slammed into each other.

Lian Fan [sic] felt a burst of extremely hot true qi flowed along the whip and penetrated his hand. The true qi turned into a strand of such a powerful force that his own true qi protecting his body did not seem to have the least bit of effectiveness. With a stifled grunt he was shaken so severely that he nearly fell to

the ground.

On the other hand, Xu Ziling borrowed the reaction force from the tip of the whip to give him the opportunity to draw another mouthful of true qi while his body was still flying midair, which enabling him to traverse sideways and fly outside the siege. Xie Yujing's famous 'Flying Fairy's Short Blade' completely failed.

Lian Fan had deep emotional ties with his brother; forgetting Xu Ziling, he rushed over to hold Lian Chu up and asked, "How are you feeling?"

Lian Chu's entire face was flushed with abnormal redness; with acute shortness of breath, he gasped, "Quickly help me circulating my energy!"

Seeing that in just one move Lian Chu had suffered great loss, everybody was overwhelmed with shock; however, they did not have time to think too much. Shen Fazheng, Tu Li, and Li Changheng, three men immediately gave chase.

Again, Xu Ziling changed direction midair. But by the time he landed on the slope of a small hill, Xie Yujing was soaring right behind him.

Xu Ziling let out a smile brimming with masculine charm; stretching both hands out, suddenly the hands turned into hundreds and thousands finger shadows, palm shadows, to meet her 'Flying Fairy's Short Blade' head-on.

For the first time the two combatants had the opportunity to meet face-to-face. Xu Ziling noticed that Xie Yujing was about twenty years old, her hair was rolled up in a bun on top of her head, the clothes she was wearing were of palace style colored painted-on design, her overall dress style resembled Yang Guang's imperial concubines. Her jade countenance was as pretty as a flower, her figure was graceful, brimming with extreme female charms. In terms of beauty, she was not inferior to Yun Yuzhen.

Xie Yujing also noticed Xu Ziling's good looks; her pretty eyes brightened, but her hands were not slacking at all. Borrowing the momentum of her falling down from above, the two blades protecting each other, suddenly advanced suddenly retreated, the blades changed several times in the blink of an eye, in a chain

attack toward Xu Ziling.

‘Ding! Ding! Dang! Dang!’

Like a divine treasure Xu Ziling’s hands jabbed, swept and plucked, blocking Xie Yujing’s fierce offensive moves completely. The most formidable thing was that each finger, each palm also sent out incomparably scorching innate qi, forcing this beauty to constantly bounce back, so that she was unable to fall to the ground, and had to continuously engage him in hard fighting in the air.

By this time Shen Fazheng’s sword attack arrived first. Letting out a long whistle Xu Ziling unleashed the ‘Meridian Severing Technique’ Tu Shufang taught him, taking advantage while Xie Yujing’s blood and qi were churning after being shaken by him, he scratched the vein on her left wrist, while the middle finger of his right hand poked the tip of the other short blade.

Xie Yujing screamed involuntarily, both hands went numb, the short blade in her left hand suddenly moved to Xu Ziling’s hand, followed by a burst of hot qi penetrated her right hand blade and entered her body. Naturally she could show off by meeting the attack head-on, but it would not be much different than she was trying to kill herself. Therefore, she had no choice but to raise her qi and somersaulted backward, to fly away as far as she could, to neutralize the opponent’s fierce true power.

For that reason, when Shen Fazheng’s attack arrived, Tu Li and Li Changheng were still seven, eight zhang away, the situation became one-on-one confrontation between Shen Fazheng and Xu Ziling.

Xu Ziling’s eyes shone with cold rays. With a cold humph he charged directly into the core of Shen Fazheng’s sword net, unexpectedly applying the dangerous tactics of burying himself in close combat.

When Tu Li and Li Changheng arrived, they did not know where to start.

All they saw was two figures chasing each other on the slope of the hill, entangling each other into a ball, while the sound of clashing blades was ringing continuously.

It was only now that Shen Fazheng came to understanding as why Xu Ziling was able to drive Yuwen Wudi away in defeat, anger Li Zitong that he retreated, and escape the imperial city under the besiege of Yuwen Huaji's rebel troops. It was because this young martial art master's most formidable moves were all without predetermined pattern, the moves were entirely instant creation like a heavenly steed soaring across the skies.

The figures suddenly separated.

Shen Fazheng staggered and fell back.

In their shock, Tu Li and Li Changheng attacked together from left and right.

Xu Ziling waved his right hand, the 'Flying Fairy's Short Blade' flew to meet Li Changheng's face, while he himself flew toward Tu Li.

'Bang! Bang!'

No matter how Tu Li changed the angle, Xu Ziling seemed to already anticipate the changes of his two hatchets, using the edge of his palm he ferociously cut onto the hatchet's body.

Tu Li let out a miserable grunt; the tremendous hacking force pushed him back. Momentarily forgetting that he was on a sloping hill, he nearly rolled down in an extremely awkward condition.

Li Changheng evaded the short blade thrown at him. He was about to charge upward when Shen Fazheng, with his hand pressing against his right flank, where blood was gushing out from an open wound, shouted, "Changheng, back off!"

Li CHangheng stopped grudgingly; he cast an angry look toward Xu Ziling, who was standing at the top of the hill.

The others have also come over, but not in surrounding formation like before.

Xu Ziling looked at the enemy with his cold eyes and aloof demeanor, as if he considered himself unexcelled in the world.

Shen Fazheng said, "Let's drop this matter today, I am sure we will meet again someday."

Just as they appeared suddenly, their disappearance was even more sudden.

Naturally Xu Ziling knew that this was just the beginning. Collecting his terrified mind, he darted down toward the dock.

Book 6 Chapter 10 – Revealing True Feelings

Xu Ziling ran over a small hill, and saw Kou Zhong at the foot of the hill. That guy only wore pants, he was bare-chested, with a steel saber of unknown origin between his teeth, and was immersing himself in a small creek, washing the bloodstains all over his body.

Under the moonlight, his skin looked shiny and glistening, his perfect physique looked like a leopard that has just reached adulthood, brimming with power from head to toes, and some kind of extraordinary, yet conforming to the law of heaven, beauty.

He looked focused and did not seem to realize Xu Ziling's arrival. But suddenly he looked up at him and broke into wide grin. His smile was as brilliant as the shining sun, and it was full of captivating charms. The saber in his mouth dropped into his hand, with a casually flick of his hand the saber flew and embedded itself on the thick bough of a large tree by the creek.

With several jumps Xu Ziling wend down the hill, and sat on a large rock protruding out of the water in the middle of the creek. He quietly stared at the still trembling saber hilt without saying anything.

Kou Zhong dipped his whole head into the ice-cold water of the creek, drank several mouthfuls of cold water, pulled his head out the water, wiped the water from his face, and said with a sigh, "I killed a lot of people, but also received injuries. The most serious one is a punch on the pit of my stomach, but I beat that guy up that his bones shattered. Humph! They wanted my life, naturally I took enough of theirs."

A burst of emotion bubbled up in Xu Ziling's heart; for the first time he realized

that Kou Zhong and he had become important figures who were able to assume personal responsibilities.

Kou Zhong immersed his entire body into the water. Giggling, he said, “Fortunately, we have miraculous internal energy, any injury will be healed naturally without leaving any scar. Otherwise, it would be awful when we have to take off our clothes; our bodies will be covered with scars, how could we let others see that? Hey, why don’t you take a dip in here? The water will clear up your brain a lot.”

Xu Ziling shook his head to decline, “Who attacked you?” he asked.

“It was Haisha Bang people,” Kou Zhong nonchalantly replied, “They were under the leadership of that flirtatious Taoist Priestess, trying to catch me with ropes and nets like I was a wild dog. Several hundred people against me, one man; I really don’t know why they committed such a shameless act. Fortunately I was fighting and fleeing at the same time, and in the end I slipped into the water to escape. You Qiuyan [(sic) it was ‘the Mermaid’ You Qiufeng in Book 2 Chapter 7] still thought that I was the useless kid of the past, she went underwater to give chase, and fell under Laozi’s control. Fortunately I, Kou Zhong, have always had tender, protective feelings for the fairer sex; I only pinched her breasts a couple of times and then I let her go. This time I’m telling you honestly, you, Ling Shao, should not suspect that I am lying to you.”

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “You are such a loose guy; a Taoist Priestess, and an enemy in this matter, you still refused to let her off.”

“This is called ‘confusing the enemy’s heart’,” Kou Zhong lightly said, “When that slut saw me, her eyes lit up; I was merely comforting her while we were at it. Who knows? Perhaps in the future there will be other benefits too.”

Xu Ziling remained silent.

Kou Zhong rose up from the water with a splash, the creek water came to his waist. Stretching, he said, “Oh, my good brother! It seems to me that recently you disagree with my conduct a lot, is that right?”

Xu Ziling sneered and said, “Marrying a woman is every man’s dream; as your brother, how could I blame you? It’s just that you are basically only teasing them verbally and causing mischief driven by your carnal desire, you view everything only from a utilitarian consideration. That is what made me a little uncomfortable!”

Kou Zhong nodded, “That is precisely the difference between intentionally seeking and without any desire to seek. We are pursuing different goals; hence we appear to have different opinion. This is the effect of training the ‘Secret to Long Life’; you are hot, I am cold. Not only it changed our temperament, it even changed our character. When I kill people, unexpectedly I don’t have any stirring or surging emotion. Even now I don’t feel like it was a big deal. Otherwise I would have been slaughtered by others by now.”

“What’s your plan now?” Xu Ziling suddenly asked.

Kou Zhong sat on the bank of the creek, leisurely watching his feet kicking and playing in the water. He smiled and said, “Didn’t we agree to proceed with our salt business? When people no longer dare to mess with us, we will succeed.”

“That’s not what I am asking,” Xu Ziling said, “I want to ask you: how are you going to fight for the world?”

Kou Zhong looked at him. There was an unprecedented glint in his eyes. Without answering the question he said, “If I really want to vie over the world, I must ask you to do something for me: to kill someone.”

Xu Ziling was visibly shaken. “That Li kid!” he exclaimed.

Kou Zhong threw his head back and roared in laughter; he looked so heroic and majestic. Slapping his thigh, he praised, “This is called ‘great minds think alike’ [orig. heroes usually agree]. Among the people worth our considerations, in terms of bearing and charisma, who could surpass him? Plus his predecessors have been involved in politics and government affairs, he is acutely aware of the way to govern the people, and he is still young, so I say that he is my, Kou Zhong’s biggest rival.”

“You are not afraid Xiuning will be grieved?” Xu Ziling asked.

Kou Zhong’s eyes flashed coldly; he said, “How can one woman affect my grand plan and great undertaking?”

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and asked, “But why did you ask me?”

A faint smile escaped from the corner of Kou Zhong’s mouth. “I am not afraid of anybody,” he said, “Except you, one person. And I know that you have a very good impression toward that Li kid. As long as you don’t stop me, and that Li kid agrees to work for me, there will come a day when he will die under my, Kou Zhong’s hands. I am ruthless to anybody; you and Su Jie are the only exception.”

Xu Ziling’s razor-sharp gaze was fixed on him as he said, “If one day after you obtain the world you find it necessary to have me eliminated, will you personally make your move?”

Kou Zhong slapped the water surface with his palms, a column of water rose. Turning his head and his eyes to look at the drenched Xu Ziling, he roared in laughter and said, “That’s not going to happen. Quickly apologize to me!”

Xu Ziling leaped high into the air and pounced on Kou Zhong, pulling him down into the water. The two boys wrestled and fought just like when they were little kids, totally without any martial art master’s style.

When Kou Zhong had Xu Ziling’s head locked in the crook of his arm, gasping and laughing he said, “Kid, do you know that there is another decree to hunt and kill us?”

Xu Ziling stared at him blankly, “What kind of ghost decree?” he asked.

“It was that flirty Taoist Priestess who told me,” Kou Zhong replied, “The issuer is that Shan Wanjing, who grew to hate you because of her unrequited love for you. The reward is one thousand taels of gold plus one of Dongming Pai’s ‘divine subduing-sect weapons’, the Dongming Sword; very attractive. One thousand taels of gold is enough to finance a hundred-strong army for two, three years.”

Xu Ziling smiled bitterly and said, "That stinky Princess is not worth the trouble. It's just a useless account book! Hey, don't put my mouth into the water!"

Kou Zhong raised his head a few cun and said with a giggle, "It's hard to fathom someone's mind; girls' mind is even harder to understand. Ha! Hatred caused by love. Do you surrender now?"

Xu Ziling suddenly lifted up Kou Zhong's entire body and threw him backwards. Without looking at Kou Zhong fell flat on his back into the water, he cursed, "Hatred caused by love my @\$\$\$. From beginning to end, the one she looked up to was that Li kid, or perhaps even Ba Fenghan, never the two of us."

Kou Zhong pretended to be crawling up in such a sorry state; wiping his face, he said, "Since we are already wet anyway, we might as well go steal a boat. I will settle the score with you later."

The two boys returned to the past where there was no load in their minds. Hee hee ha ha they chased each other toward the sea.

When the two boys had their heads out of the water in the sea, they saw moored at the pier hundreds of ships and boats, big and small, none of them was not brightly lit, and all of them were chained together to each other. Not only there were men on sentry duty on the boats, there were also patrolling boats going back and forth, and a lot of Haisha Bang men equipped with bows and arrows and other long range attack weapons.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "We created enough disturbances that Haisha Bang people will not have a good sleep tonight! Han Gaitian himself is an arrogant idiot. His subordinates, those 'Fat Assassin' You Gui, 'Charging General' Ling Zhigao [see Book 2 Chapter 7], and the others are nothing; this is such a counter-productive deployment. If I were in charge, I would have ordered all boats to steer away from the dock, so that even if we have the power, it would be difficult to carry out."

"Are all these dozen or so piers belonged to Haisha Bang?" Xu Ziling asked.

“Ought to be so,” Kou Zhong replied, “Because of Yuhang’s prime location, plus Han Gaitian tied brotherhood with Shen Faxing, Haisha Bang’s navy vessels are concentrated at Kunling and Yuhang, two locations, with the main responsibility to transport army provisions and supplies for the Jiangnan Army. If we burn all these ships, Jiangnan Army will fall into predicament. Let’s consider it a payback for their treatment to us. Come on!”

The two boys dove into the bottom of the sea and swam toward the enemy’s battleship.

By the time they reappeared on the surface, they were already in the middle of the enemy’s ships. Avoiding the patrolling boat, the two boys hid in the dark side of a ship, discussing the next step.

Kou Zhong said, “These ships are at least one zhang apart from each other. Even if we burn one or two of them, it would still be difficult for the fire to spread to other ships.”

“That’s easy,” Xu Ziling said, “We only need to scuttle one or two particularly big ships. When the ships sink, because they are chained to each other, the sinking ship will pull the other boats along. Burning them will be a lot easier then.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “That is a good plan indeed. I’ll go find tinder, you go bore holes on the ships. Remember to use your ‘Jade Cutter’, don’t dig by hand. Ha!”

Third watch of the night [11pm – 1am]. Haisha Bang piers were suddenly thrown into confusion. The two biggest ships suddenly sank at the same time, pulling the other ships along with them.

Looking at the speed those ships were sinking, those with discerning eyes knew immediately that someone was playing a trick on the bottom of the ships.

You Qiuyan, You Gui and Ling Zhigao, three people led a large quantity of Haisha Bang martial art masters to rush out. The former shouted with her tender

voice, “Quickly untie the chain!”

Kou Zhong appeared at the bow of one of the ships. Naked from the waist up, he had a saber in his right hand and lifted high a torch in his left, as he laughed aloud and said, “Too late!”

You Qiuyan and the others were still scared of him from their earlier battle, plus You Gui and Ling Zhigao were hacked by him, and their wounds were still burning. Seeing him coming with such an awe-inspiring might, momentarily they panicked.

Flames soared to the sky.

Just by looking at the speed at which the blaze spread, one would know that kerosene must have been poured out onto the ship, thereupon the situation quickly got out of hand.

You Qiuyan screamed, “Kill him!”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and jumped onto another ship. With a saber in his right hand and a torch in his left, he beat the swarming Haisha Bang people that they would whine on for days; one after another they were thrown into the sea.

When You Qiuyan and the others were rushing toward Kou Zhong, they suddenly saw from another ship some distance away one fiery arrow after another were shot in succession toward the other ships. Flames immediately rose up from all around.

Meanwhile Kou Zhong had disappeared. You Qiuyan focused her attention to look, turned out it was Xu Ziling who released the arrows, the Haisha Bang people who were guarding the ship had already driven to the sea by him.

You Qiuyan shouted, “Quickly put out the fire!”

By this time, cutting the ropes was already useless, all the ships were

entangled in a heap. The flame from the ship Kou Zhong burned had already spread onto nearby ships.

The shouts from the ships shook the heavens. The Haisha Bang people whether they should put out the fire first or to chase and intercept the enemy; it was a total chaos.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling jumped from one ship to the other, setting everything in their path on fire, creating havoc wantonly, but always avoiding the enemy's main force.

You Qiuyan and the others knew they should have split up to intercept the enemy, but recalling how formidable these two boys were, they were scared to face the enemy alone and thus could not guarantee their little lives. With no other choice they had to hunt down only Kou Zhong.

Night breeze blew, the fire was getting bigger.

More than ten ships were trapped in the sea of fire.

Suddenly Kou Zhong turned back to meet You Qiuyan and the others. The Hall Master of Yuhang Division, Leng Qiu bore the brunt. Hastily he brandished his staff to attack.

Kou Zhong's tiger-eyes flickered continuously, brandishing his saber he hacked backward; suddenly he broke through Leng Qiu's staff's line of defense. With one step forward he chopped at his left shoulder. Fortunately Leng Qiu could keep up with the helmsman, plus he really had real skill, so in his shock he swept the tail of his staff up to block, and took a step back at the same time.

Two sabers chopped down on Kou Zhong in an attempt to rescue Leng Qiu from danger.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud, but his saber continued to strike the tail of Leng Qiu's staff, and swiped through Leng Qiu's left arm before he retreated to the aft of the ship. Leng Qiu grunted in pain, his blood splashed and he pulled back.

A chill crept into everybody's heart, why did Kou Zhong seem to be more formidable than the last time they fought?

‘Dang!’

Kou Zhong parried the two sabers at the same time, lightning fast both his legs executed chain kicks, two Haisha Bang martial art masters, who normally went on the rampage in Yuhang, immediately spurted blood as they flew face-up backwards, so that You Qiuyan and the others panicked.

Holding the saber across his chest, Kou Zhong shouted, “All right! Today I do not wish to kill anymore. You want to kill us, we brothers burned your ships, we are even. Tell Han Gaitian and Shen Faxing to come to us! If you dare to pursue us, don't blame Laozi's saber for not showing mercy.”

The crowd was intimidated by his display of power, momentarily they only dared to make a show of charging, but nobody really dared to move forward.

In the battle a moment ago, the dead and wounded on their side numbered more than thirty men, a considerable loss; this moment the opponent had the addition of Xu Ziling. While their own strength was substantially reduced, who would dare to step forward to strike the tiger's whiskers?

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and soared into the sky. With two somersaults, he landed on a medium sized sailboat that Xu Ziling brought over.

Looking at the sailboat sailing away, You Qiuyan suddenly stomped her foot and pouted, “Still not putting out the fire? I am annoyed to death!”

The sailboat went full speed ahead, the two boys took turns singing loudly. They were extremely happy, as if all the unhappy incidents recently have been purged completely.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Haisha Bang is one of the eight-gang ten-societies. It ranks above Beautiful Shifu's Jukun Bang, yet we managed to put

their face in a bag and slap their big mouth, we even burned a dozen of their ships.”

“Don’t be so smug,” Xu Ziling said, “We had just tied a deep enmity with Jiangnan Army; we are going to see some hard days ahead in transporting our goods.”

Kou Zhong sat at the edge of the boat, watching Xu Ziling at the helms; he cheerfully said, “Isn’t that our original intention? I dare say that since ancient times there never be martial art masters who fought day and night like us. Three months’ experience worth more than other people’s three years. If this continues, in ten months we will gain ten years’ worth of skill. Ha! What a great deal!”

Xu Ziling laughed and said, “You, this kid, seem to be more excited the more you fight. But you are right, only from real combat experience we will learn good stuffs; at least seeing sabers and spears flying around we don’t feel it is such a big deal.”

Kou Zhong just smiled but kept his opinion for himself. Unexpectedly he fell asleep. Without any option Xu Ziling had to prop his eyelids open, while steering the sailboat toward the brightening horizon where the sky and the water met.

Three days later, the two boys returned to their former haunts. Gently and cautiously they brought the boat to the shore and moored it well. Sitting on the beach, all sorts of feeling welled up in their hearts. The two boys were lost in their own respective thought; they both felt their excitement was driving them mad.

By the time the sun was about to sink into the ocean, Kou Zhong picked up a handful of sand. Watching the grain of sand trickling down from his fingers, he sighed and said, “Xiao Ling! Have you ever thought that we would have days like today? In the past we often boasted that we are martial art masters, while in fact we are well aware what kind of nine-schools-of-thought[1] character we are. Now we have truly become martial art masters, but so what? We are still unable to do anything to Yuwen Huaji.”

Xu Ziling laughed involuntarily, “Zhong Shao really knows how to talk that kind of talks,” he said, “There must be something else behind it. Say it!”

Kou Zhong shook his head and sighed, “Seems like in this world, you are the only one I can’t fool,” he said, “All right! You want me to say it then I’ll say it. What I mean is that the world is like a big pie [orig. flat bread], whoever has the ability, that person will get a slice. That ability represents strength and power. Once we have these two distinct things, we will be qualified to do the things that we like, whether it is for the benefit of thousands of people, or to settle gratitude and grudges; in short, without these things, there is no law. Even if I became Bi Xuan, and you became Ning Daoqi, killing Yuwen Huaji is still not an easy thing, perhaps we even have to pay it with our own little lives. Do you understand what I am talking about?”

Xu Ziling somberly said, “I was just thinking about how we spent every moving moment here in the past, yet you are thinking about vying over the world; aren’t you afraid you will miss many wonderful things in life? Every day you are thinking about either killing other people or guarding against being killed by other people.”

Kou Zhong’s big eyes lit up, “But those are the stimulating things, those are the exciting things. If I have nothing to do all day long, won’t I suffocate myself to death? Previously I also thought about putting up with you a little bit, only doing conscientious thing and making profit unscrupulously, but the more I think about it, the more I feel it’s not worth it. If you don’t do the most exciting things, how could you live with yourself? Presently what the people all over the world need is one true master and liberator; if you have aspirations, how could you miss anything?”

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, “When all is said and done, what you want is for me to help you.”

Kou Zhong moved in front of him, dropping down on one knee, he reached out with both hands to grab Xu Ziling’s shoulders. With eyes projecting deep emotions and passionate expression, he solemnly said, “No one in the world understands your ability, wisdom and spirit better than I do. With you, my good brother, helping me, other people can only retreat for three days’ march [i.e. giving way in the face of superior strength].”

Xu Ziling reciprocated by reaching out to grab his broad shoulders; he spoke heavily, “Well said! No one in the world understands you better than I do as well. Only you, one person, can turn the entire world upside down. Basically you don’t need my help.”

Kou Zhong dejectedly let his hands go and sat down on the sandy beach. He sighed and said, “How can I see you go?”

Xu Ziling reached out to wrap his arm around him tightly; he said in a low voice, “We’ve grown up. Each one of us have our own vision and goal in life, we are no longer Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling of the past. In the future you don’t need to take the responsibility of avenging Niang, just go do what you need to do! The day you and I go our own ways will be the day I set out on my journey to assassinate Yuwen Huagu. If I cannot put my hand on the blade that will enter that wretched body, I can never find true peace in my heart.”

[1]Nine schools of thought, philosophical schools of the Spring and Autumn, and Warring States periods (770-220 BC): Confucians, Taoists, Yin and Yang, Legalists, Logicians, Mohists, Diplomats, Miscellaneous, Agriculturalists. Figuratively: mainstream, abysmal.

Book 6 Chapter 11 – Delivered To Their Door

In just one sichen [i.e. 2 hours] the two boys managed to load more than forty sacks of salt onto their boat. Only after thinking that in the past they had to work all night long and spent tremendous strength [orig. the strength of nine bulls and two tigers] to accomplish the same thing did they really feel the progress they have made.

Dawn had yet to arrive, they already set sail.

Kou Zhong said, “Let us try to follow the Great River upstream westwards inland, if we can’t go on, then we’ll take land route!”

Xu Ziling frowned and said, “In term of steering the boat, you and I are low-hand [Translator’s note: in Chinese, master/expert is ‘high-hand’], we can’t even compare with ordinary sailor. In the ocean, there is no problem, naturally! Especially under the situation where the breeze is still, the waves are quiet. But when we enter the river ...”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “You think too much! If the boat sank in the Great River, we will simply dredge his mother’s up. Taking the land route at that time won’t be too late. Don’t forget that we are ‘high-hands’ [see note above] both on land and sea.”

Xu Ziling put Kou Zhong’s hand on the rudder and said with a laugh, “Your turn. I am going to the cabin to sleep.”

Kou Zhong grumbled, “If I had known earlier, I would have grabbed several Haisha Bang minions and forced them to pilot the boat, then we would not have

to suffer like this right now.”

Xu Ziling woke up by the sound of battle drums; momentarily he thought he was in the battlefield. Rushing out of the cabin, he saw Kou Zhong was squinting to look at three boats in triangular formation coming fast toward them. The boats had more tapered ends, and each one was about a zhang longer compared to their boat. Therefore, in term of mobility, especially since their boat was loaded with salt, those boats had the upper hand.

Both sides were coming fast toward each other.

Under the abundant sunshine, the two boys could see that all three boats had several dozen men standing on the deck; everyone had an arrow strung on a bow, or loaded stone catapult, ready for action. Some even had long poles and other tools to lock the ships in their hands, while they were moving back and forth on the deck; it was an awe-inspiring scene to behold.

Flying high above the deck was a banner with ‘Gao’ character on it.

Xu Ziling came to Kou Zhong’s side and frowned, “Who are these people?” he asked.

A bright smile appeared on Kou Zhong’s face; he said cheerfully, “Just by listening to the drums, we know that they are in high fighting spirit. But looking at the disorderly way they are moving around, we know that they are simply a mob. They must be pirates who go everywhere to plunder; the best sailors we can catch.”

“What?” Xu Ziling cried out.

“Just leave everything to me,” Kou Zhong said, “Let us hide inside the cabin first to avoid the arrows. Once they board our boat, we’ll show them some trick and have these hairy thieves see.”

‘Bang! Bang!’ Using hooks and ropes, two of the enemy ships sandwiched their boat from left and right, and the crowd of thieves immediately swarmed in.

Three men charged into the cabin, while the rest inspected the sacks of salt on the deck and in the hold.

The other pirate ship took the lead; all four boats now sailed together. For the time being, it looked like the pirates had the situation under control.

Three of the pirates, who looked like the leaders, stood on the aft giving directions to the rest of the pirates. The biggest and tallest was a man with eyes that looked like bronze bell. His long hair was draped over his shoulders, his face full of beard, his physique looked bold and powerful. Two short tasseled spears, about five chi long each, were hanging in an 'X' shape on his back, making his overall appearance even more awe-inspiring. It is kind of surprising that there was such character among the pirates.

"Huh?" this man exclaimed, "Er Lang has gone into the cabin for so long, why haven't he come out with those two boys in custody?"

A short, thin man with a dignified look standing by his side said, "Let me go take a look!"

The man on the other side, a thick and strong young man, who was only a cun or so shorter than the big man with loose hair, but still bigger and taller than average person, with two iron rings hanging from his waist, apparently some kind of weapon from a strange school, said, "Let me go with Er'ge [second (older) brother]."

The man with loose hair nodded his approval, he said in a low voice, "Something's strange, be careful!"

The young man laughed aloud and said, "What kind of wind and waves we, Donghai Sanyi [three sworn brothers of the eastern sea] have never seen?" Finished speaking he followed that short and thin man, which he called the second brother, into the cabin.

While the big man with loose hair was following his two sworn brothers disappearing into the cabin entrance with his eyes, an underling came to report, "Daye [big master]! All the sacks piled up on the deck contain salt."

The big man with loose hair muttered to himself, "Tough luck. Unless these useless goods are transported inland, just how much money can we sell them for? But the boat is top-quality goods."

A voice glibly responded, "Your three boats are not bad either, perhaps you'll let us make his mother's deals."

The pirates were shocked; their countenance paled.

Kou Zhong was sitting leisurely at the cabin's roof, one leg above the other, the broadsword lying across his knees, his feet hanging above the hatch, swaying back and forth casually, looking indescribably comfortable.

Under the bright sunlight, his smile looked so brilliant, his tiger-eyes exuded some kind of deep and immeasurable divine ray. When he looked around and their eyes met, nobody did not feel dread growing from the bottom of their heart.

The man with loose hair was shocked. "What did you do to them?" he asked.

With flawless smile Kou Zhong replied, "Tell your men not to act recklessly first, and then this Shaoye will be interested in considering whether he should answer your question."

The man with loose hair made prompt decision. "Everybody stop! Come to my side!" he shouted.

The more than twenty pirates who boarded the boat hastily moved to the aft, so that they became two sides facing each other, the enemy and us were demarcated clearly.

The man with loose hair was clearly someone who valued comradeship. His eyes glittered like frost and snow, as he said coldly, "This time just consider us committing an offense. As soon as Sire release them, we will immediately turn on our heels, and we never eat our words."

Kou Zhong knew that these people saw them quietly subdued five of their comrades, so they were scared in their hearts; thereupon, he laughed aloud and said, "How can it be that easy? I want all of you to throw yourselves into the sea, hand over your three boats; otherwise, don't even think that you will live to see tomorrow's sun. Humph! You rely on strength to loot the week, you ought to know that this day will come."

The pirates' countenance changed, they all shouted and cursed. Everybody assumed the heroic posture of 'ready to fight to the death'.

The man with loose hair let out a sudden burst of shout, "Shut up!" Slowly taking out the pair of spears on his back, he said in a heavy voice, "This is called 'refusing a toast only to be forced to drink a forfeit'. Kid, state your name."

Kou Zhong giggled and said, "Old kid, you tell me first!"

The man with loose hair was taken aback, and then he smiled and said, "One is a kid, the other an old kid, fair enough, listen up. Laozi is the head of Donghai Sanyi, the Double Spear, Gao Zhandao."

Kou Zhong doubled over in laughter, "Luckily the weapon you use is rather special, if you only used sword, you'd have to change your name to Single Sword, Gao Zhandao. That nickname, you must have come up with it yourself, didn't you?"

Gao Zhandao and the pirates have never met someone who in the face of a battle was still able to talk and laugh as though nothing had happened, plus his words were amusing and without any devious or blaming intention; a strange feeling started to grow in their heart.

"Rubbish!" Gao Zhandao shouted angrily, "Since you refuse to give up, just call your companion, we will see who's superior who's inferior." While secretly signaled his men by his side, as soon as the other enemy hiding in the cabin came out, they ought to immediately rescue their comrades.

This was the brilliance of Kou Zhong's plan of capturing five men of the

opponent's side, otherwise, Gao Zhandao might come back to his pirate ship and launch long-distance attack, then their own boat's demise would be guaranteed.

Kou Zhong suddenly calmed down. His tiger-eyes shining with divine light, as he stared at Gao Zhandao and spoke indifferently, "Just to deal with you, these small thieves, there is no need for my brother to come out. Gao Zhandao, if you still have a little bit of thief's guts, just fight one-on-one with me; if you can take ten moves, this Shaoye will release your men."

"Shut up!" Gao Zhandao roared angrily, "How could I, Gao Zhandao, tolerate your random babbling of little thieves this and that, left and right? No need to have ten-move limit either, let us see who has real skill."

Kou Zhong frostily said, "You board boats to loot, if not thieves, then what are you? You rely on force to bully the weak, you only dare to make a move on fishermen, common people who have no power to fight you, if not small thieves, then are you something completely different?"

A man standing by Gao Zhandao's side retorted and cursed, "Aren't you also a thief? Is smuggling salt considered honorable or shady business?"

Kou Zhong laughed involuntarily, "What's not honorable in this?" he said, "Northwest region lacks salt, we spare no effort, transporting salt over ten thousand crags and torrents, we buy and sell honestly, both sides are perfectly happy to do business; don't you think it is much more noble than robbing money and goods that others obtained from their blood and sweats and hard work?"

The crowd of pirates was dumbstruck and unable to reply.

Kou Zhong vehemently continued, "Men's existence in the world is to have critical and lofty aspiration, to have broad view over the world. After Laozi earns this profit, I want to use it to recruit soldiers and buy horses, to fight over the world, to accomplish great undertaking that will stand for eternity; how could you, small thieves who only know how to rob left and seize right, understand?"

Gao Zhandao snorted disdainfully; striding over, he shouted, "No kidding! Let Laozi see how much weight you carry."

While the crowd of pirates burst into cheers and applause, Kou Zhong already sprang up and swooped down from above; like a thunderbolt the long saber in his hand struck toward Gao Zhandao's face.

Gao Zhandao did not expect Kou Zhong to be so dauntless, that as soon as he said that they would fight he immediately fought. The incoming attack carried the ten thousand jun [1 jun = 30 catties] force of a thunder; without any choice he clenched his teeth and raised his double spears and crossed them on each other to block this incomparably swift and fierce saber.

It should be noted that for top-quality martial art masters, before they could display their power at peak condition, they must focus their attention first and warm themselves up, and only then would they be able to release the full potential of their internal energy without any reservation. Someone like Kou Zhong, who did not go through the process but was able to unleash his power brimming with explosive force like this, was simply too shocking; the crowd of pirates was astonished beyond words.

'Pow!' With a dull thud Gao Zhandao staggered seven steps back in succession before he could stabilize his footing; his countenance was deathly pale.

Kou Zhong, on the other hand, was secretly full of praise, realizing that this man was actually a lot more superior to them, two brothers; unexpectedly he was able to withstand Kou Zhong's full-powered blow.

The crowd of pirates could see clearly that their leader was in bad situation; they rushed forward to stand in front of Gao Zhandao, but nobody dared to make any move against Kou Zhong.

Kou Zhong stood quietly, holding the saber across his chest, exuding some kind of heroic, uninhibited aura in a beautiful, elegant posture. Bending his finger, he flicked on the blade of his saber, creating a clear, ringing buzz. He smiled and said, "Since you are able to block my saber strike, this time I am willing to drop this matter."

Gao Zhandao had just finished driving away Kou Zhong's cold qi invading his

body; overwhelmed with amazement, he said, “May I ask Sire’s honorable surname and great given name?”

Kou Zhong replied nonchalantly, “My name is Kou Zhong, my brother is Xu Ziling. I won’t be surprised if you have never heard our names.”

The crowd of pirates was visibly shaken.

“How could we have not heard?” Gao Zhandao suddenly said, “Recently you burned more than a dozen Haisha Bang’s ships, even Li Mi cannot do anything to you.”

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted, “You have fast and abundant news indeed. Did you get the information while you were disembarking and strolling on land?”

The pirates were amazed, one of them even said, “How could Kou Ye [master] even guess those things?”

Kou Zhong’s desire to fight vanished completely. Seeing the pirates looked at him with admiring, even adoring eyes, he laughed aloud and said, “Let’s make a deal. We will release your five brothers; in turn you prepare a sumptuous banquet for us, two brothers to enjoy. After that, we will go our separate ways; how’s that?”

Gao Zhandao put away his two spears; he said with delight, “This is the first time in my life that I, Gao Zhandao, meet this kind of natural hero like Kou Ye. Kou Ye is willing not to blame us for our recklessness, naturally we will gladly accept [orig. deference is no substitute for obedience]. Ha! This is really wonderful.”

Turns out the pirates were originally Sui soldiers. In the seventh year, second month of the great undertaking [Translator’s note: I believe this is in reference to the founding of the Sui Dynasty], Emperor Yang issued an imperial edict to send a punitive expedition to Gaoli [Korea, see my note, Book 1 Chapter 3]. These people were conscripted at Zhuo County, to join Sui Army’s main force heading to Korean capital, Pyongyang [ping rang]. After the first victory, subsequent military expedition suffered defeat after defeat; Sui troops were demoralized,

plus army provisions ceased to reach them.

Gao Zhandao was a member of a 300,000-man army, they suffered crushing defeat in the middle of summer, and only 2,700 men were able to return to Liaodong [peninsula].

The first time they defeated Gaoli, the cost in terms of manpower and physical resources was disastrous, they ought to recover. Who would have thought that Yang Guang sent the second punitive expedition to Gaoli in the ninth year of the great undertaking? Taking advantage while Yang Guang was out in the military expedition, and common people detest military service and forced labor bitterly, while the world was in chaos, the Director of the Board of Rites Yang Xuan led the troops to rebel. It was during this time that Gao Zhandao and the others decided to rebel against the Sui and followed Yang Xuan as renegades.

After Yang Xuan's troops were defeated and he died, Gao Zhandao and the others fled back to Kunling. To their surprise, the family they left behind had been implicated and was beheaded early on. Without any other choice they had to flee to the sea and became pirates.

The short and skinny fellow was called Niu Fengyi, the young man was called Zha Jie. Not only these two had a quite good martial art skill, they were also educated men who read a lot of books. Therefore, along with Gao Zhandao, the pirates pushed them to become their leaders.

The group originally had 52 men, but presently they grew to become 228 men. This time they went out to sea, only 208 men joined the expedition, the others stayed to guard their lair in Changsu [county, in Suzhou, Jiangsu].

The four boats sailed together northward as a fleet along the coastal region.

The sky gradually darkened, but the boats were brightly lit.

A banquet was prepared on Kou and Xu, two boys' boat. Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong, Gao Zhandao, Niu Fengyi, Zha Jie, and a few more leaders sat around the table, drinking and chatting merrily in perfect harmony.

As for steering the boats, they handed it over to some small thieves to handle.

After listening to their life story, how the government official drove the people to revolt and forcing talents to become pirates, Xu Ziling's ill will diminished a little. More so, he noticed that these people were real men who valued family, thereupon he asked, "Gao Xiong, you can't go on like this; don't you have the desire to turn over a new leaf?"

Niu Fengyi smiled bitterly and replied, "Right now the world is all split up and in pieces, where can we find a place to live in peace and work happily? Currently we band together into a group, nobody dares to mess with us for no reason; we are quite well-off, even if we agree to stop, I am afraid our fellow brothers will not want to agree."

Zha Jie spoke up in earnestness, "We are merely forced to fall into the grass. Therefore, unless it is absolutely necessary, we would never kill indiscriminately. Even in robbing, we also have a sense of propriety; we never rob impoverished fishermen. If Xu Ye don't believe me, ask the people around here, you will now our, Donghai Bang's [eastern sea gang] work style."

Another leader, Wei Yuan, said, "At first we saw two gentlemen's ship bore the flag of Haisha Bang, we thought you were from Haisha Bang transporting goods for Shen Faxing, an attractive and easy mark."

Gao Zhandao suddenly turned to Kou Zhong, who was enjoying a large bowl of wine and a large piece of meat and was chewing contentedly, "Just now Kou Ye mentioned something about your aspiration to vie for the world; I wonder what kind of grand plan do you have in mind?"

Xu Ziling shot Kou Zhong a look; he was the only one who understood Kou Zhong's super-outstanding trick in controlling others. Just now he was unleashing that skill with all his heart and soul to manipulate Donghai Bang people, using both soft and hard methods to scare them off that they became like clay in the palm of his hand. The most formidable part was to raise the opposite party's lofty aspiration, while displaying the 'I-don't-give-a-damn' attitude, so that they would be most willing to come to him.

Kou Zhong drained the wine in his cup in one gulp, put the cup down, used his sleeve to wipe the wine stain from the corner of his mouth, swept everybody with his flashing-with-divine-light eyes, and spoke nonchalantly, “Tell me, who is currently have the biggest chance and the most qualifications to obtain the world?”

Without the slightest hesitation Gao Zhandao replied, “Naturally it’s ... hey! I am only stating the fact. In term of prestige, naturally Li Mi holds the first place.”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, “He is only well-regarded on the surface. The biggest problem is the Eastern Capital has high and thick city walls, it also has former Sui’s elite troops, on top of that, they are under the leadership of Yang Shichong [sic], who has real skill in military literature and military strategy. Previously Li Mi failed to attack Luoyang, and now can’t attack Luoyang even more, even slight carelessness will cause him big defeat.” [Translator’s note: while I think it was Wang Shichong, but because I am not 100% sure, I am afraid to simply change it to Wang Shichong; henceforth I will write the name as is.]

Zha Jie did not understand, “It is rumored that Duke Mi is proficient in historiography, well-versed in ‘Records of the Grand Historian’ [by Sima Qian (145-86 BC), Han Dynasty historian] and ‘History of the Former Han Dynasty’ [by Ban Gu (AD 32–92)], and is also proficient in the art of war, his repeated victories over repeated battles confirm this. The most formidable thing is that he knows how to buy the heart of the people. If he cannot obtain the world, who will have that qualifications?”

Kou Zhong already had a card up his sleeve; he said, “Don’t forget there is still Dou Jiande in the northeast curbing Li Mi. Besides, this fellow Li Mi has committed something that a hundred-time, a thousand-time he should not have done.”

Niu Fengyi was stunned, “What’s that?” he asked.

Xu Ziling knew what Kou Zhong was going to say, inwardly he admired Kou Zhong’s ability, wisdom and charisma; to touch these three men’s heart would be as easy as turning his hand.

“He murdered Da Longtou Zhai Rang,” Kou Zhong calmly replied, “Because of that, the old generals who had been following Zhai Rang are discontented and afraid of their own safety. Wagang Army no longer has the unity of the former Wagang Army.”

Gao Zhandao was puzzled, “But presently tens of thousands people are coming to him, outstanding heroes from all over the world are flocking to Xingyang to attach themselves with Duke Mi and achieve greatness; his strength ought to be increased.”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Coincidentally, this has become two major problems for him. First of all, the old people are afraid they might be pushed aside by the newcomers, add to that the apprehension of high-ranking officers who used to have close relationship with Zhai Rang; secondly, the elite troops of the new Wagang Army thereby has good and bad people intermingle with each other, who could tell if they have been infiltrated by the opponent’s spies? Humph! People keep saying how talented and outstanding Li Mi is; in my opinion, he is only so-so. If I were him, I would only house-arrest Zhai Rang, let him be a puppet leader who has a name but no reality.”

Gao Zhandao and the others exchanged glances, they all showed amazed look on their faces. Xu Ziling sighed inwardly, knowing that Kou Zhong’s intention to vie over the world was already like an arrow that left the bow; there was no turning back. Li Mi and the others have just gained one more terrifying formidable opponent. Having Gao Zhandao and his group of pirates under his control was only the beginning.

Book 6 Chapter 12 – The Debut Of The Wing

Under the star-filled-sky ocean, four boats slowly sailed in a fleet.

After another round of wine, Gao Zhandao modestly asked, “That being the case, who does Kou Ye think will have the greatest chance to sit on the throne?”

Kou Zhong turned to Xu Ziling and said, “Why don’t Xu Ye tell us?”

Xu Ziling shook his head and said, “Our Kou Ye can tell it more vividly, I also want to hear Kou Ye’s enlightening remarks very much.”

Kou Zhong sneered and said, “You, this kid, are the best in deriding me.”

Meeting everybody’s eager eyes, he said word by word slowly, “Whoever can seize Guanzhong will become the emperor, ruler of the new dynasty.”

And then, as if his thoughts were wandering far away, he said, “Those who desire to obtain the world but don’t understand the time, geography and harmony of the people, these three things, are like the blind who rides a horse in the night overlooking an abyss. Chang’an is located at the Guanzhong Plain [in Shaanxi, valley of the River Wei]. It is situated south of Wei River, north of Qinling Mountain Range, fertile land that spans thousand li, surrounded by a range of hills. Since ancient times it has been a strategic location for both transportation and military matters. Zhou, Qin, and Han have all made it their capital, they constantly built and expanded it. The present Chang’an has been built by Yang Jian as a new city. Not only its scale is the apex in the world, it also opens wide the connecting canal drawing Wei River flowing to the east to Tongguan and enters Yellow River. Speaking of transportation, Luoyang is perhaps superior to some degree. But speaking about military affairs, we must give a serious look at the latter. In the past Qin Shihuang was able to unify the six directions, sweeping and wiping out the outstanding heroes, the reason is summarized in these eight characters: ‘fertile land people flourish, danger can be guard against’ [di wo ren fu, you xian ke shou].”

Niu Fengyi slapped the table and sighed, “Reminded by Kou Ye, today’s situation came to Fengyi’s mind. The present situation is exactly the same as the Warring States period [475-221 BC]. History unceasingly repeats itself; this is the best example.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Compared to the Warring State period, where the heroes were fighting over the world, the present situation is a hundred times, a thousand times more chaotic.”

Everybody nodded their head in agreement.

Gao Zhandao asked, “Are you saying that the Li Clan has the greatest opportunity to become the overlord of the world like Qin Shihuang?”

Kou Zhong shot a glance toward Xu Ziling before saying indifferently, "If I, Kou Zhong, did not exist, then that would be the case."

By this time Gao Zhandao and the others were already in complete prostration to Kou Zhong's insight; they busily asked him to elaborate.

Kou Zhong's spirit was greatly aroused; he said, "The Li Clan has three big problems, which are not easy to resolve: in the first place, they used to be Sui officials, and common people detest Sui Dynasty bitterly. Anything, be it people or object, associated with Sui Dynasty is difficult to accept. Secondly, the Li Clan is a famous, rich and powerful family. During the time where people's mind is in rebellion mode, this has become a burden instead. Thirdly, their heir apparent is Li Jiancheng and not Li Shimin. I, Kou Zhong, dare to bet my neck that this will go wrong in the future."

Niu Fengyi agreed, "Kou Ye has a brilliant insight. Although Li Jiancheng's martial art skill is superior to his father, and has the reputation as the number one martial art master of the Li Clan, he is unlike Li Shimin whom people give their allegiance to, his popularity is far too inferior. Currently he is the Tang's Heir Apparent, but he is highly questionable."

Kou Zhong's eyes shot a chilling light, but his tone was surprisingly calm. Again, word-by-word he said slowly, "At the moment the Li Clan is barely able to stand firm and have a stable footing. The calamity within their bosom is precisely the territory they occupy is Western Qin's Li Gui and Xue Ju, two large forces, the so-called 'Western Qin is settled Guanzhong is calm, Western Qin is a mess Guanzhong is chaotic'; plus Qin and Liang are situated on higher ground to the west of Longshan Mountain Range, their tiger-eyes are staring at Guanzhong."

The longer the Li Clan is unable to pacify the Western Qin, they cannot be considered as truly in control over Chang'an. Even more, they are powerless to go east to take Luoyang, and go on to pacify the world."

And then he slapped the table so hard that the soup and meat dishes splashed, bowls and cups shook. "Whoever can drive the Li Clan away and occupy Guanzhong will be able to rule the world," he said solemnly.

Zha Jie scratched his head, "But I heard that on the way to attack Guanzhong, the Li Clan absorbed a great number of generals and soldiers from various regions, as well as recruited able-bodied men, their military strength reaches 300,000 men. On top of that, their city defense is strong; taking Chang'an is easier said than done. Didn't Xue Ju have just suffered a crushing defeat?"

Kou Zhong leaned back on his chair, stretched himself, and said, "The finesse of an army is not in its number; otherwise Gaoli would have been eradicated by Yang Guang early on. Don't forget that I still have the 'Duke of Yang Treasure Trove'!"

Gao Zhandao and the others were emotionally moved.

Recalling Fu Junchuo, Xu Ziling suddenly felt uncomfortable. He rose up and said, "Please forgive Zaixia for taking my leave, I want to go to the cabin and rest for the night." Without waiting for any response he simply left.

Kou Zhong was silent; his tiger-eyes flashed a sad look.

Xu Ziling stood quietly by the window, silently gazing at the bright moon over the sea.

Kou Zhong quietly pushed the door and entered. He came behind him and said softly, "Are you unhappy that I touched 'Duke of Yang Treasure Trove'?"

Xu Ziling shook his head, "No!" he said, "I have no such thought. Niang told us the location of the treasure, clearly she wanted us to go get it. I'm just afraid that you talked too big too soon, if another day you can't find the treasure, you won't be able to honor your commitment. That's all."

Kou Zhong said, "That's why I wanted you to help me. One lifetime two brothers; you have to help me find the treasure no matter what, and only then can you leave."

Xu Ziling turned around to meet Kou Zhong's passionate expression in his eyes; all kinds of past events flashed through his mind. His heart softened and he said, "So what do you have in mind?"

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted; he said, "Over the last several years that kid Gao Zhandao has amassed a large quantity of weapons, boats and wealth. If we can train them well, they can become our disciples army. With them as our troupe members, we can make meticulous plan to put an act of transporting salt. Other than killing Li Mi's prestige, our reputation will also soar. Along the way we can recruit soldiers and buy horses, and tie good relationship with

heroes all over the world. The best part of our plan is that we do not occupy certain territory, we won't declare ourselves king, and only emerge to contend for hegemony after we obtain Guanzhong. Hey! What do you think?"

Xu Ziling smiled wryly, "You are talking too far ahead," he said, "At most I will only help you find the 'Duke Yang Treasure', and then I will withdraw and leave you."

Kou Zhong hugged him. "That is enough, you are indeed my good brother," he said, "We are going to organize Shuanglong Bang [double-dragon gang]. Leaving no stone unturned, we infiltrate all militias, gathering intelligence first, while continuously buying the people's heart. Once the uprising begins, we know exactly who our opponents are."

Knitted his brows, Xu Ziling said, "Gao Zhandao and the others are used to be pirates, will they be willing to listen to your commands?"

Kou Zhong let him off, laughed aloud, and then lowering his voice, he said, "They have just kowtowed and offered me a toast, and called me Bangzhu [gang leader]. Now we are going to their pirate nest; after establishing good control over their power and organizing and training them, we can be on our way immediately."

And then, patting his chest he said, "Trust me! I, Kou Zhong, can train a team of peerless-throughout-the-world elite troops, a team that can beat Li Mi, Ol' Die, Yuwen Huagu and the others that they will cry for their Niang. Oh! But you have to help me train as well."

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “I should have known that you would ‘beat the snake following the stick’ [see Book 3 Chapter 3]. But after obtaining the treasure, you must not use any other trick to make me stay.”

Kou Zhong extended his big hand and said, “One word and it’s settled!”

Xu Ziling also reached out to grab his hand tightly.

Looking at Kou Zhong’s tiger-eyes gleaming with unusual shine, a hard-to-describe feeling welled up in Xu Ziling’s heart: he had a faint feeling that in this troubled times, right this moment, powerful hegemon, who could move clouds just by waving his hand, who could control rains with a turn of his hand, has suddenly emerged.

Shuanglong Bang was established quietly without the knowledge of any Jianghu people.

Kou Zhong demonstrated his outstanding talent in controlling the more than two hundred men who were accustomed to live of oppressing others; everybody was willing to look up to him for leadership.

In just one night he managed to blend Li Jing’s ‘Bloody Battle Ten-Style’, Tu Shufang’s ‘Meridian-Severing Technique’, plus the martial art of his own understanding, into a new set of ‘Divine Dragon Eight-Strike’, which he then

passed on to Gao Zhandao, Niu Fengyi, Zha Jie, three men, and delegated them to teach the Gang members.

He also single-handedly developed a simple, yet tight organizational structure. The general idea was that there were two Gang Leaders; naturally Xu Ziling could not hold any other office, but the fact was that virtually all power was in Kou Zhong's hands. Under the Gang Leader, there was one military advisor [Junshi], four gang protectors, and then three Hall Masters overseeing three inner halls: internal affairs, finance, and training, which were under Gao Zhandao, Niu Fengyi and Zha Jie, respectively. The three outer halls were in charge of war, intelligence and provisions.

Each hall had a hall master and his deputy hall master, which were in charge of day-to-day hall affairs to some degree. Except for the three inner hall masters, the other positions were still vacant, waiting for suitable virtuous candidates.

In the water fort of Changshu [county, Suzhou, Jiangsu], Kou Zhong was busy day and night; he personally drafted a proposal of the Gang Bylaws. After he was done, Gao Zhandao and the others could not think of a single character to change; as a result, they admired him even more.

He forced Xu Ziling to train his men. Xu Ziling was amiable and approachable, so he enjoyed great popularity, plus everybody could see that his pair of hands was superior to any weapon, hence he was extremely admired. His men were in high morale and did not have any contempt to him due to his young age.

Two months passed quickly like that. One day Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were studying the changes and variations in troop formations, Gao Zhandao came to report that a large number of Jianghu people from surrounding area heard the news, and since they admired the two, they came to join the Gang as volunteers

for the uprising.

Kou Zhong pondered for half a day before saying, "Please tactfully decline them all. Currently our condition is not stable yet, there are still a lot of things not on track; if we suddenly expand, we may have a dismal ending."

Gao Zhandao accepted the order and left.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "Xiao Ling! When we are victorious in battle we can expand."

Xu Ziling nodded and said, "The rumor has leaked. This bunch of people must be spies sent by Shen Faxing. Seeing that we did not fall into his trap, these next couple of days he may send his men to attack us. Let me send our spies to scout the enemy's movement, when they come back, I will report to Bangzhu."

Kou Zhong doubled over in laughter, "Kid, don't tease me; what Bangzhu? Aren't you also one? Bangzhu or Emperor are just appellation people use, between us, brothers, there is no such thing."

Xu Ziling laughed aloud and left without further ado.

After Xu Ziling returned that night, Shuanglong Bang's several highest echelons gathered in the main hall for a secret meeting.

Xu Ziling said, "It is just as Kou Bangzhu thought, Shen Faxing deployed approximately two-thousand men to lie in ambush in a forest southeast of our stronghold, estimated distance two-day marching."

It was only now that Gao Zhandao and the others found out what happened. But looking at Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's 'we have everything under control' expression, they became excited too; rubbing their fists and wiping their palms, they were eager to go into battle with heads held high.

Kou Zhong said, "This time we are going to fight a beautiful battle. We are not looking to annihilate the enemies, we only hope to meet the enemy head-on, inflict heavy losses, and behead the commander-in-chief. And then we will deal with other things one by one, proceed with previously developed plan.

"So which plan are we going to do?" Niu Fengyi asked.

Kou Zhong replied, "If my estimation is correct, this time Haisha Bang is also taking this opportunity to settle old debt, therefore, they must have come with the enemy as well, if not, they must have taken the water route to attack us from two fronts, water and land, hoping to kill us clean in one go."

Turning to Xu Ziling, he said, "I'll give you Han Gaitian."

Xu Ziling smiled slightly and said, "In that case I'll hide alone in Haisha Bang's flagship, and become maritime assassin one time."

Full of admiration, Zha Jie said, "When as soon as we got here Bangzhu ordered us to reinforce the defense, we thought that it was superfluous; but now we know that Bangzhu really have foresight."

Kou Zhong laughed, but did not say anything, while thinking in his heart that if Laozi did not have a bit of ability, how could I control you, this bunch of big thieves?

Three days later, it was a moonless and windy night. Everybody was well aware that the time the enemy was going to attack has come.

When darkness fell, all Shuanglong Bang's seven warships quietly left the dock. Kou Zhong led a hundred men to lie in ambush at the more than a dozen bunkers on the mountain and fields outside their water stronghold, quietly waiting for the enemy's honorable selves to honor them with their presence.

By the first watch period [7-9 pm] more than fifty warships, big and small, appeared on the surface of the sea outside the water stronghold, let down their skiffs, and launched the attack from the sea.

Almost at the same time hundreds of torches lit up, covering the mountains and the plains, as probably close to a thousand men were charging toward their stronghold.

The enemy taking the land route relied mostly on cavalry, with the infantry providing support; it was a large-scale military attack.

Who would have thought that before they even reached the stronghold gate, the horses were either falling into pits full of sharp spikes, or stepping onto the field of sharp spikes that their feet were broken, their blood splashed and they fell to the ground. For a short while the situation was a total chaos.

This moment, close to five hundred skiffs full of soldiers have just arrived at the wooden fence surrounding the water stronghold when suddenly out of nowhere several dozen fiery arrows filled the sky. The surface of the sea around them, as well as the dozen or so wooden constructions across the wooden stronghold rapidly caught fire. Very soon the invading troops were trapped on the sea of fire.

Haisha Bang and Shen Faxing's coalition army realized that they had fallen into a trap. Hastily they blew the trumpet signaling retreat.

Kou Zhong led his men to fire arrows from the dark, while at the same time signaling his men everywhere to set on fire to cut the enemy's retreating path. Right this moment Xu Ziling had just climbed onto Han Gaitian's five-mast flagship.

He craned out his neck from the edge of the ship to look around, and saw on the platform above the cabin on the main deck Han Gaitian was standing anxiously, like an ant on a hot pathway, unceasingly issuing orders, while the subordinates around him were quiet out of fear. His other subordinates on the other ships were running back and forth, trying to get the ships turn around in hasty retreat.

The most formidable part of Kou Zhong's plan was that the enemy did not have any attack target.

Xu Ziling took out the pebbles he had already prepared and suddenly jumped up onto the deck, and then soared onto the platform. His hands threw the pebbles in rapid succession toward the wind lanterns hanging from the masts, rupturing their covering and extinguishing the fire inside, so that by the time he landed onto the platform, the entire deck has fallen into complete darkness.

Han Gaitian did not even have any chance to fetch his weapon, Xu Ziling's fist already arrived at his chest.

Overwhelmed with shock, the 'Fat Assassin' You Gui and the 'Charging General' Ling Zhigao on his left moved to intercept.

'Bang!'

Han Gaitian was worthy to be the leader of a gang; crossing his palms together, he met Xu Ziling's fist head-on.

A scorching qi suddenly turned into million strands of soft thread, which, contrary to Han Gaitian's wish, penetrated and invaded his arteries and veins.

In unbearable discomfort Han Gaitian nearly threw up blood; hastily he recoiled backward and circulated his internal power to dissolve the invading qi, while his subordinates swarmed forward to surround this terrifying lone assassin.

Who would have thought that in a flash Xu Ziling disappeared from their midst

and soared above Han Gaitian's head? Fast as lightning his both feet kicked in succession toward his face. You Gui and Ling Zhigao's weapons trying to meet him hit empty air.

Although the other men also pounced on him, but because Xu Ziling was moving like a ghost, plus the deck was so dark that it was difficult to see, momentarily they were thrown into confusion, nobody knew how to deal against this enemy, so that although they had the strength, it was difficult to unleash it.

'Swish! Swish! Swish!'

The 'Mermaid' You Qiuyan stepped aside, waved her hand and continuously shot three silver hairpins, which she pulled from her hair, toward Xu Ziling, who was flying in the air.

'Bang! Bang!'

Han Gaitian abruptly raised a mouthful of true qi to keep the endlessly surging blood in his vessels under control, while lifting up his palms to block Xu Ziling's swift as the wind rotating wheel of six kicks.

Han Gaitian let out a painful groan, staggered and fell down; trickle of blood appeared from the corner of his mouth, having experiencing the dreadful innate true qi from the 'Secret to Long Life'.

Xu Ziling fantastically shifted forward, missing You Qiuyan's secret projectile by a hairbreadth. Although he started later, he arrived earlier behind Han Gaitian.

Han Gaitian was so scared that his soul flew away and scattered; although he knew that it was a desperate moment, he could only rely on himself to save his own life. Turning around, he raised his palms to attack Xu Ziling.

Suddenly Xu Ziling spun swiftly; in an instant he counterattacked with five palm strikes and four kicks, plus a shoulder bump and an elbow strike, giving the impression that any part of his body could become a deadly weapon.

The sound of clashing qi rang continuously.

The two combatants were suddenly closing in to each other, but then just as sudden they separated.

Xu Ziling somersaulted and leaped away from the platform, and then with another push of his toes on the ship's railing, he leaped into the boundless ocean, and disappeared without a trace.

Everybody rushed toward Han Gaitian; they saw him clasping his hand on the pit of the stomach. It was only by leaning on, and helped by, You Qiuyan that he did not fall down to the floor.

They saw Han Gaitian's face was like the golden paper used in funerals; he said in trembling voice, "Retreat immediately, my internal injury is extremely heavy, albeit the opponent was being lenient to me. We hereby drop this matter."

Everyone was stunned speechless.

Who could have imagined that in mere two months Xu Ziling has become much more formidable?

And thus Shen Faxing and Haisha Bang's coalition army suffered defeat and was forced to retreat. They lost more than a thousand men, while could not even touch the enemy's shadow.

By daybreak, seven warships, carrying the Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling-led Shuanglong Bang, quietly set sail from a hidden dock by the water stronghold, which had been burned to coke, bound for the ocean.

Everybody of the Shuanglong Bang was in high spirits, they all looked up to Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling like deities.

Kou Zhong knew that he had established his credibility, so when the darkness fell, he summoned Gao Zhandao, three people, into his presence, and instructed them, "We will separate here. You will secretly go to the appointed place, to

recruit soldiers and buy horses, and to advance our carefully drafted master plan. Xu Ziling and I will take only four men to transport the salt to Guanzhong. Be sure to remember not to take any risk and to advance too quickly, you must not leak our relationship even more.”

The three accepted the order and returned to their respective boat.

Kou Zhong walked over to the aft, toward Xu Ziling, who was standing with his hands behind his back, enjoying the ocean scenery. He sighed and said, “Our great undertaking is finally launched. When we left Yangzhou that day, I was dreaming that this day would come.”

Xu Ziling spoke indifferently, “If Su Jie did not meet any mishap, we should be able to see her soon.”

A bit embarrassed, Kou Zhong said, “I am very concerned about Su Jie too. We parted in the middle of winter, and now it is already the end of spring. Five months passed before we know it.”

Their sailboat changed direction, slowly leaving the fleet, heading toward the northwest.

Only four sailors and those sacks of salt remained on the boat. These four men were Duan Yucheng, Bao Zhifu, Ma Gui, and Shi Jie. They were roughly between twenty to twenty-four, twenty-five years of age, and everyone was handpicked personally by Kou Zhong, and have undergone special training by him; they all had especially high natural gifts.

Xu Ziling looked deep into Kou Zhong’s eyes and said, “Transporting the salt this time has made us tying a lot of enmities; have you considered the consequences?”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, “But it has also made us tying a lot of friendships. Xiongdi! Life is like that; if we want friends, then we will have enemies as well. This can be considered an important phase in our training. As long as we don’t die, by the time the salt is safely delivered to Guanzhong, we will become martial art masters unequalled under the heavens!”

The moon rose from the horizon, illuminating the entire border where the sea and the sky met, creating a mysterious, as well as beautiful, world.

Book 7 Chapter 1 – Two Lords Of The Yangtze River

The salt boat left the ocean to enter Yangtze River against the stream.

‘Knock! Knock! Knock!’

Following the knocking on the door, Xu Ziling’s voice replied from the inside, “Come in!”

Kou Zhong pushed the door and entered. Seeing Xu Ziling sitting cross-legged on a chair by the window, he laughed and said, “You, this kid, are really diligent.”

Xu Ziling replied indifferently, “I have a very bad feeling; there will be trouble tonight.”

Kou Zhong sat down across from him; nodding his head, he said, “I came here to tell you exactly that, the enemy has caught up with us, two ships are hanging on our tail. I really wish I could turn around and have fun killing them.”

Xu Ziling smiled and said, “Fighting power is at the bottom of our list. What crafty idea do you have this time?”

Kou Zhong shook his head and swayed his noggin as if he was reciting something, “Knowing me, Kou Zhong, am not like Xu Ziling. We can never sit quietly on a boat without inviting others to look for bad luck. But if there are that kind of shameless people around, if we don’t have the guts to fight, then we have the guts to burn their ship or drill their boat. Otherwise our salt goods will

be in jeopardy.”

Xu Ziling said, “Kou Bangzhu must give considerations to Duan Yucheng, those four kids; otherwise, even in lifting or other menial jobs, Kou Bangzhu will have to toil your precious hands.”

Kou Zhong let out a bitter laugh and said, “I am begging you! Please stop speaking using that kind of sarcasm to make fun of me! Naturally I will give them consideration. As the Bangzhu, if I don’t cherish my underlings, who would want to throw their lives in for me?”

Xu Ziling also felt that his tone was a bit too excessive. “Just consider me in the wrong!” he said apologetically, “What brilliant scheme are you thinking?”

Kou Zhong made himself comfortable, leaning back on his chair he stretched out his legs, and said, “After dark, we will make our first move by getting rid of those two ships following behind us ...”

Xu Ziling laughed and said, “You are not thinking of scuttling other people’s ships, are you?”

Kou Zhong was upset. “You guessed it again,” he said, “Speaking about underwater skill, who could surpass us? Those four guys are making preparations as we speak. When we get out of the back of the cabin later, they will release a great amount of thick smoke to interfere with the enemy’s line of sight, and then we’ll seize that chance to go underwater, we’ll take care of the enemy’s ships, one per person. This time we are going to use the real tool to bore a boat. Based on our Two-Dragon of Yangzhou’s divine skill, with two, three strikes we should be able to ... huh?”

Rapid footsteps were approaching, flustered and exasperated, the short, small, but highly capable Bao Zhifu blurted out outside the door, “Two Bangzhu, the situation does not look good, the enemy’s catching up with us.”

The two three-mast ships behind them were only about forty zhang away, and were closing in really fast; evidently their speed was a lot faster than their boat.

Presently the river course was deep, and the stream rapid; both banks were dangerous towering precipice, with the water closer to the edge full of dangerous reef, very steep. Obviously the enemy had already picked this exact place to launch their attack early on.

That night the moon was really beautiful, the turbulence reflected the moon and the stars' splendor, like millions of slivery snakes dancing on the surface of the water; it was extremely wild and enchanting.

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong stood at the aft, focusing their eyes to look, and saw that the observation platform on each ship were packed with dozens of people, all were also looking at and pointing at them.

When the two boys' gaze fell on the decks of the enemy's ships, they could not help sucking a mouthful of cold air, because each ship had at least several men with drawn bow pointing at them, as well as several catapults.

How could they fight this battle?

Kou Zhong's eyes flashed a cold murderous look. "I wonder whose ships are they?" he asked no one in particular in a heavy voice.

The slender and handsome Duan Yucheng, who was in charge of the helm, heard him and called out, "They should be Dajiang Hui's [Great River Society] warships. Their best trick is that they are able to turn fast, which other helmsmen are not able to do."

Dajiang Hui was one of the Eight Gangs Ten Societies; they achieved their fame in Jianghu early, which was by no mean an easy feat. Their Gang Leader and his deputy were the 'Dragon Lord' Pei Yue and 'Tiger Lord' Pei Yan, two brothers, famous to be vicious and merciless. Even as early as they were still in Yangzhou, the two boys had already heard about their notoriety; it's just that they did not expect that as soon as they entered the Yangtze River they already came across these vicious people.

Kou Zhong nudged Xu Ziling and muttered, "His granny's Niang, we can't beat them fair and square, what can we do this time?"

Although ever since their debut they had already anticipated encounter with enemies who wanted to invade their territory, but they only thought about little clowns in groups of three or squads of five, or perhaps one or two martial art masters who wanted to curry Li Mi's favor, never this kind of big troop formation.

The enemy basically did not give them any chance to have a close combat.

Xu Ziling spoke nonchalantly, "Abandon ship!"

Kou Zhong was staring at the enemy ships, which were about twenty zhang away by now; stunned, he asked, "Won't that mean this batch of salt will come to naught?"

Xu Ziling said in amazement, "Zhong Shao, why does your brain suddenly become so slow? The one abandoning the ship is the two of us. Don't you see that every one of the enemies is equipped with wet suit and harpoons? Apparently after sinking our ships they are going to go underwater to capture us. Then why don't we jump into the river one step ahead, so that the enemy won't need to waste arrows, sling stones, and the burning oil?"

Kou Zhong slapped his forehead; applying his internal energy he shouted toward the enemy's ship, "Pei Yue, Pei Yan, are you, a snake and a cat, going to poo or pee here?"

A cold snort came from the enemy's ship.

The two boys shivered in fear; the opponent's snort was loud and clear, but not excessively shrill, evidently he had a deep internal strength, definitely not someone they want to mess around with. If on top of that there were also other martial art masters plus more than two hundred warriors with deep water skill, equipped with net, bows and arrows, their chance of getting capture was a hundred percent.

Another dull, stuffy voice from the enemy's ship on the left said, "The two of you must be tired of living; death is near at hand and still dare to blurt out

offending remarks. If you are a bit smarter you'd immediately stop your boat. Do you think that our Dajiang Hui is as friendly as those Haisha Bang people?"

The two boys focused their power into their eyes, and saw the speaker to be a tall and sturdy man, with baldhead, broad face, and thick lower jaw, wearing black robe, looked rather lofty, and only around forty years old.

But the one really attracting the two boys' attention was a twenty-something man in purple clothes standing to the left of the baldhead. This kid was tall and thin, but sturdy, the bridge of his nose was high, but rather flat. His look was actually not bad, it's a pity that his eyes were unusually small and narrow that they seemed to pull his face together, so they did not match his overall appearance, which gave people a very uncomfortable feeling.

The reason the two boys paid a particular attention to him was because inside this man's narrow eyes, the pupils were gleaming with unusual shine, evidently it was because his internal energy was a notch above the man who has just spoken; definitely a rival difficult to deal with.

This moment, Ma Gui, whose face was full of pimples came behind the two boys to report, "We are ready to release the smokescreen anytime!"

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted. "Watch for my signal!" he said.

Ma Gui received the order and left.

To divide the opponent's attention, Xu Ziling laughed aloud and said, "Stopping the boat so that everybody can be intimate with each other is a must, but I wonder which Dajiang Hui's Dangjia [the one in charge] is speaking?"

The baldhead shouted coldly, "I am Pei Yan. If you are tactful, immediately lower your sail and stop the boat, otherwise we will attack. If that happens, don't blame our Dajiang Hui for not showing any mercy."

The young man in purple clothing let out a shrill laughter before saying, "Currently Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong are very valuable; otherwise, how could you

move Pei Er Dangjia to toil for ten days and ten nights to follow your trail? However, unlike other people, we don't capture you to be presented as a gift, we only hope to collaborate with two gentlemen, to start a great undertaking."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged a glance; they understood now that the opponents were after the 'Duke Yang Treasure'.

Noticing the enemies had been closing in for ten more zhang, Kou Zhong shouted, "Sire, who are you?"

Pei Yan answered for him, "You guys really have eyes without eyeballs, that even Changbai [mountain] number one martial art master Wang Baogong's only Gongzi, the 'Thunder Saber' Wang Kuijie Gongzi you don't recognize. How could you roam the Jianghu?"

Pretending to be greatly astonished, Kou Zhong responded, "I wonder if Bi Xuan and Ning Daoqi recognize Wang Gongzi? Won't that mean that they should not have roamed the Jianghu?"

Pei Yan's original intention was to flatter Wang Kuijie, but hearing Kou Zhong's remark, he was stumped.

Worse yet, Wang Kuijie was embarrassed.

Realizing that the opponent might turn embarrassment into anger, Kou Zhong hurriedly issued an order to release the smokescreen.

Sure enough, the sound of drums arose from one of the enemy's ships; everybody bent their bows with arrows at the ready; as soon as the ships were getting closer, they would shoot.

With continuous creaking noise, more than a dozen stone, about a chi-square each, were shot first from the trebuchet, and flew high up in the sky toward them. At the same moment, four windows closest to the water at the aft of their boat suddenly opened, four streams of black smoke erupted out.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling immediately soared into the air, their fists and feet worked together, diverting the stones that looked like they might hit the boat away.

Before the enemy's ships had the chance to launch the second round of stones, the thick smoke was blown by the wind so that they were trapped inside the smoke.

Black smoke was continuously blown from the bellows operated by Bao Zhifu and Shi Jie, two persons. In the blink of an eye the air behind the boat was covered in thick, dark smoke.

On the deck, Ma Gui, Duan Yucheng, along with Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, four people, who, after all, were still young at heart, cheered excitedly.

Suddenly there was a loud gust of wind; someone was breaking the smokescreen, like a big bird swooping toward Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, with the vigor of a gigantic hawk catching a rabbit, as a ball of saber ray pounced on them.

Kou Zhong stayed calm without the slightest sign of fear; he shouted, "Good move!"

Lightning fast he drew his long saber and turned it into cold light. 'Ding!' it hacked onto the saber ray protecting the opponent's body.

The man and Kou Zhong exchanged an all-out saber attack; in horror he found out that Kou Zhong's saber not only carried an incomparably amazing cold true qi, which broke through his own saber qi and even forced it back, but also the cold qi continued to seal his saber momentum so tight that he was unable to continue his attack. In his great shock, he borrowed the opponent's force to catapult himself back, made a somersault in the air, with the intention to land on the platform on top of the cabin.

On the other hand, Kou Zhong was also jolted by the opponent that his qi and blood surged up in his chest. While he was secretly shocked by the opponent's formidability, Xu Ziling already soared into the air like an angry eagle, to

intercept the dreadful opponent by one step, so that the two of them exchanged several moves in the air.

Xu Ziling's weapon was his body.

In addition to his hands and feet, no part of his body could not be used as an offensive weapon against the enemy. Obviously that person has never encountered such moves; three times in succession his saber attack were neutralized by Xu Ziling's saber-breaking technique, so that his leap could not continue and he was forced to alter direction toward the side of the boat.

Xu Ziling also felt his strength was exhausted, so he safely landed on the platform to take a breather.

Only then did he see clearly that this person was precisely Wang Bao's son, Wang Kuijie.

Meanwhile, Kou Zhong had anticipated the point where the opponent would land, hence he already flashed over and waited with the saber held horizontally across his chest. Laughing aloud, he said, "This time it is indeed a good move!"

Wang Kuijie groaned inwardly; he saw Kou Zhong was waiting down there with tight defense, while he himself was still unable to dissolve completely Xu Ziling's qi invading his body. Falling rapidly like this would not be any different than suicide.

'Swish!'

Nobody knew where the arrow came from, but it swiftly flew toward his back.

Wang Kuijie was also an outstanding talent; abruptly raising his qi, he miraculously rose up by a chi or so to evade the powerful arrow, and then with a flip he leaped over Kou Zhong and plunged into the water.

Carrying his big bow Ma Gui rushed over to the edge of the boat and ferociously shot an arrow to the spot where Wang Kuijie disappeared into the

water.

By this time the surface of the river behind the boat was completely shrouded in black smoke. Kou Zhong breathed a sigh of relief.

Xu Ziling leaped down beside him and said, "That guy's saber technique was swift and fierce, I was nearly fooled."

Kou Zhong nodded, "His qinggong is not bad either," he said.

Fixing his gaze at the black fog behind the boat, Xu Ziling said heavily, "If you have to fight him fair and square, how confident you are in scoring a victory?"

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and replied, "At most only fifty-fifty."

Both were feeling heavy; they no longer had the same confidence as when they first started.

The days ahead would not be easy.

The morning sun was rising, a new day has begun.

Avoiding the Yangtze River, the salt boat entered a tributary and cast anchor in a river bend hidden underneath thick lush trees.

After rushing all night long, Duan Yucheng and the others, four men, needed a good rest. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, two boys were on guard duty.

Xu Ziling noticed that Kou Zhong was looking for a small sharp chisel, and when he found it, he diligently carved something on the blade of his saber. Squatting next to him, Xu Ziling asked, "What are you doing?"

"I want to give my treasured saber a proper name," Kou Zhong replied proudly.

Xu Ziling burst out laughing; he said, "If you consider this saber a treasured saber, then all sabers under the heavens, with the exception of some especially inferior quality goods, can also be considered treasured sabers."

Kou Zhong solemnly said, "That is precisely the reason it can display my, Kou Zhong's prowess. This is originally an ordinary saber, but because of me it will become world-famous tool, this is the saber that will let me strike everywhere all over the world. Ha!"

Xu Ziling sat down on the deck, close to the boat's railings. Taking a deep breath of early morning air, watching a flock of birds flying in the sky, he stretched and asked, "What ghost name are you carving there?"

Kou Zhong's thick face turned slightly red; he said softly, "Moon in the Well!"

At first Xu Ziling was startled, but then he could not stop smiling, "Good kid!" he said, "You have the cheek to enjoy this good name alone!"

Kou Zhong smiled apologetically and said, "How about yielding to me a little bit? One lifetime two brothers, why argue over such thing too much?"

Xu Ziling was lost in thought for half a day. He finally said, "Duan Yucheng, these four guys' natural talent is not bad. After checking out their channel and meridians, I designed a set of qi cultivation method for each of them. If they are successful, they are going to be your biggest help."

Kou Zhong gratefully said, "Fortunately you had time to think about those kinds of thing, currently day in and day out my time is spent in thinking about future plan, I don't have time to think about that kind of water-mill effort."

Xu Ziling said, "Speaking about intelligence, Duan Yucheng is at the top of the list. But in terms of martial art skill, Bao Zhifu will be the most accomplished in the future. Above all, this man is unbelievably dauntless, with firm and persistent fighting spirit; he is the most suitable candidate to practice a hard-bridge, hard-horse skill like Li Dage's saber technique."

Kou Zhong nodded his agreement; he said, “Shi Jie excels in light, nimble skill. Just wait till I finish teaching him a set of saber technique I developed based on my comprehension of the swimming fish, I guarantee that his future accomplishment will not be inferior to the others.”

Xu Ziling said, “Ma Gui is most adept at archery and secret projectiles, only his internal energy is lacking. If we can make up for this deficiency, his future accomplishment will also be immeasurable.”

If these two boys’ dialog fell into the ears of great scholars and grandmasters such as Bi Xuan or Ning Daoqi, those people would be so amazed that their jaw would drop. The reason was not only because of their brilliant and original insight, but also because of their ability in measuring talents and designing teaching materials accordingly, with suitable internal energy cultivation method for each one, demonstrating the fact that the two boys have reached the level of accomplished founder of a sect.

Their fantastic martial art skill, first inspired by Fu Junchuo and the ‘Secret to Long Life’, enriched by Li Jing’s ‘Bloody Battle Ten-Style’, their Beautiful Gang Leader’s ‘Bird-Crossing Technique’ and Tu Shufang’s ‘Meridian-Severing Technique’, has by this time evolved into a unique, complete set of martial art skill, which was totally their own.

It was precisely because they had never received any rigid set of technique that they were relying on their own hard work and groping about, but the result was a more flexible change and variation, a set of technique of their own.

Kou Zhong suddenly had his heart filled with emotional stirring; he said, “Listening to the tone of your voice, it seems like you are ready to leave me anytime. Ay! I am so not used to not having you around.”

Xu Ziling smiled; he said, “The most important thing for a real man is to keep his words. You, Zhong Shao, have already promised that after we find the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’, you will let me go freely; therefore, you can’t casually renege on your promise.”

Kou Zhong sighed helplessly.

This moment they heard the sound of oars hitting the water, a group of five fishing boats that were strung together was sailing not too far from the river bend; it was such a calm, peaceful and relaxing scene that anybody would be hard-pressed to think that they were in the world that was all split up and in pieces, with war continuing everywhere.

Xu Ziling said, “Are we going to break through Li Zitong’s Jianghu Army’s barricade tonight?”

Kou Zhong mused, “Li Zitong can’t totally close the Great River, so he will still have to send his warship to check all vessels going back and forth. As long as we can grasp the right moment, we definitely will have a chance of breaking through.

Xu Ziling was about to speak when suddenly the alarm went off in his heart.

Kou Zhong also reacted; both he and Xu Ziling turned their gaze toward the shore. But the shore remained dark and quiet with no human shadow in sight.

The two exchanged glances; they both felt very strange.

If it were only one of them felt it, they could dismiss it as mere misperception. But the current situation was simply too weird. Who could have hidden inside the two boys’ perception range? Not only that, who could have beaten their vision by one step faster?

By dusk, the salt boat departed the river bend where they have been hiding.

Transporting the salt to Guanzhong had nothing to do with making profit; rather, it represented the two boys’ cherished wish. It could be viewed as a severe test in their martial art cultivation. If they were able to complete this task successfully, it would confirm their ability to resist any enemy.

Book 7 Chapter 2 – Alarming Change On The Salt Boat

Not long after the salt boat entered the Yangtze River, the weather turned bad, a drizzle fell continuously.

Because Duan Yucheng and the others, four men were on duty, Xu Ziling went to the kitchen to prepare a meal. He and Kou Zhong have worked as cooks before, so it was a very easy task for him.

Kou Zhong went up the deck to patrol a few times; for some unknown reason, he had a strange feeling that someone was watching them in secret, although there was no other boat in sight, the banks were also devoid of any trace of human presence.

After telling Ma Gui and the others to raise their vigilance, he went to the kitchen at the aft to find Xu Ziling.

The dishes were nearing completion. Seeing Kou Zhong came to see him, Xu Ziling knitted his brows and said, "I also have a very ominous feeling; from time to time my heart alarmed, my body leaping, and I can't calm down."

After focusing his spirit to listen all around, he spoke in Xu Ziling's ear, "I suspect the enemy is already hiding on the boat; perhaps it's even that fellow Yang Xuyan. Remember we had a strange feeling this morning, but did not see anybody?"

Xu Ziling nodded in agreement. Yang Xuyan was called the 'Shadow Assassin'

because he was skilled in hiding, was able to come and go without any trace, and only he had that kind of ability.

Kou Zhong went on, "Fighting one-on-one, neither one of us is his match, but if we join hands, we have a chance to stake our lives against his; therefore, from now on we must not separate."

Xu Ziling's eyes revealed a determined look; he shook his head and said, "If we are like that, we will never be martial art masters who are able to assume personal responsibility."

Kou Zhong stared blankly. "You are right," he said, "Since that the case, it will be better if we gain the initiative by striking first, we'll try to force him to come out and decide life and death. Ay! I wonder which side has this kid thrown himself into; the muddleheaded ruler is dead, why didn't he simply retire?"

Xu Ziling was dissatisfied, he said, "Just by listening to your last three sentences, I know you have trepidation in your heart. Didn't Niang teach us to place ourselves on a field of death and fight to live? [an idiom from Sunzi's Art of War] Only by forgetting life or death will we be able to bring out our skill to the finest detail. Someone like you, who is timid even before fighting, will be defeated for sure."

Kou Zhong painfully said, "Don't forget that Yang Xuyan that kid even dared to assassinate Ol' Die. If we train our martial art skill for several more years, we might be comparable to Ol' Die, but right now we are not."

Xu Ziling heaved a sigh. "Honestly," he said, "I am deadly afraid as well. But this is precisely the purpose of our trip in transporting the salt, to place ourselves on the field of death, to seek survival with all our strength, to advance in the martial art cultivation by the most rigorous practice. Do you understand?"

Kou Zhong took a deep breath. Patted his chest, he said, "All right! I'll listen and obey. Let's just be a bit more careful!"

Finished speaking he turned around and left.

After finishing up the last dish of rice with vegetables marinated in soy paste, and as he was about to bring the dishes out, he seemed to hear a faint sigh that sounded like a woman's coming from the doorway.

Xu Ziling was shocked.

Based on his current mental cultivation, who could possibly come this close to him and was still able to fool his acute psychic senses?

As he turned around abruptly, the lights suddenly went out.

At the exact same time, a chilling malicious spirit's howling pierced his ears, as if from the land of the living he was suddenly whisked away to the nether world.

Xu Ziling stayed motionless while collecting his spirit; focusing his power to his eyes, gradually the surrounding became brighter, and he was able to see everything with double clarity.

Immediately his tiger body was shaken severely.

Because he saw a woman with long hair and white clothing was standing at the door. Although because her head was hanging down he was unable to see her face, but her bearing, her build, and most of all the strong déjà vu vibe that she exuded, bore extremely strong resemblance to Fu Junchuo.

Momentarily forgetting that Fu Junchuo had died early on, Xu Ziling blurted out, "Niang!"

The woman trembled slightly, but then she suddenly disappeared.

Xu Ziling bolted out of the door.

The corridor was pitch-black; there was no trace of the woman.

With a gust of wind Kou Zhong flitted over; with calm and composed

expression he simply said, “All four of them have disappeared. Huh? What happened to you?”

Xu Ziling was about to answer when suddenly, ‘Splosh! Splash! Splosh! Splash!’ one after another the sound of something hitting the water came from both sides of the boat.

The two boys cried out, knowing something bad happened, and rushed out of the corridor. But just as they crossed the door and stepped into the deck, they halted their steps in extreme shock with their eyes fixed toward the bow.

Under the drizzling rain, a lovely woman wearing white, a long sword hanging on her back, her beautiful hair like a cloud, was sitting calmly hugging her knees, as if she was the only one left in the world, at the tip of the bow.

From their angle of view, her silhouette looked at least 90% like Fu Junchuo, especially her long hair and her posture; plus there was this overwhelming déjà vu feeling in their hearts.

Having seen her before, Xu Ziling was a bit better, but Kou Zhong simply lost himself as he cried out, “Niang!”

The woman slowly turned her face around.

It was a dignified and gentle face, with graceful and delicate, straight nose right in the middle between her pair of sweet and charming bright eyes, so bright that she seemed to be able to look deep into their soul.

To their surprise, it was the same mysterious, beautiful woman who had come together with Ba Fenghan the other day. At that time the boys had already had a feeling that she looked a lot like Fu Junchuo. But tonight she deliberately imitated Fu Junchuo’s dress style, so that one after another Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were fooled and called her ‘mother’.

The salt boat was without anybody steering it, but it kept sailing upstream due to the tailwind. For the time being, since the river course was straight, it was not

a problem, but as soon as they encountered any twist or turn, the boat would crash into a cliff for sure.

Kou Zhong came to his senses; he saluted and asked, “May I ask Miss, what did you do to our four brothers?”

“Throw them away!” the woman replied indifferently.

Hearing that, the two boys looked at each other in dismay. If Duan Yucheng and the others had their acupoint sealed and were thrown into the river, wouldn’t their death be guaranteed?

The woman let out a cold snort and said, “You, these two kids, are more crafty than I thought. Harming my Shijie [martial (older) sister] is not enough, you called her ‘Niang’ in front and behind her back, and have confused eyes and ears.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly surprised; the opponent was unexpectedly Fu Junchuo’s Shimei [martial (younger) sister], so they also groaned inwardly, because now they could not avenge Duan Yucheng and the others.

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, “Turns out it’s Shi ... hey! What should we call you? How about Shiyi [martial aunt (mother’s sister)]?”

The woman’s jade countenance sank. “Shut up!” she bellowed, “You may deceive others, but don’t ever dream of deceiving me, Fu Junyu. Shijie hated Han people the most, plus she was a virgin, how could she admit you as her sons? Not to mention telling you, Han dogs, the secret of ‘Duke Yang Treasure-trove’.”

Xu Ziling hastily said, “Shiyi must not misunderstand, before her death Niang confirmed us as her sons, and has passed on our precious school’s basic skill. If you don’t believe me, you can test us a bit.”

Fu Junyu coldly said, “Very well! Tell me, what is Yi Jian technique?” [yi – ancient name for ‘go’ (Chinese chest), jian – sword, see also Book 1 Chapter 3, Yi

Jian Dashi.]

The two boys were dumbstruck; they were speechless.

Kou Zhong said, "Niang only taught us the internal cultivation of the first level of Jiu Xuan Da Fa [Great Method of Nine Mysteries] before she was heavily injured and passed away; she did not tell us anything about Yijian technique."

Fu Junyu looked up at the rainy night, she said indifferently, "Using sword is just like playing chess. Each sword move is just like moving a chess piece, and the battlefield is just like a live chessboard, ever-changing. If one fails to grasp the overall situation, cannot estimate the enemy's next move, then he cannot grasp the chance of victory. This is a very important principle, Shijie did not tell you?"

This moment the boat was swerving out of the middle of the river and was slowly leaning toward the left bank.

Xu Ziling said, "Niang only told us about the 'every change of divine power' and that 'the treasure trove hidden deep within oneself is self-sufficient'."

Fu Junyu's charming body trembled slightly; she hung her head low in deep thought.

The salt boat was only less than four zhang away from the shore; fortunately a wind blew, sending the boat back toward the middle of the river; it was exceptionally thrilling.

The Korean beauty's cherry lips suddenly blurted out, "I will kill you!"

"You still don't believe us?" the two boys cried out involuntarily.

Fu Junyu's jade countenance turned extremely cold, but surprisingly the tone of her voice was extremely gentle, "It's because I believe you that I must kill you. Ay! Shijie, how could you pass on our divine skill to Han dogs? Now Junyu will have to clean up our school for you and keep this matter from reaching Shifu's ears."

The last two sentences were spoken with her face toward the heavens.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt their scalp went numb.

It was not because they were afraid of Fu Junyu at all, but due to her relationship with their Niang, they must not harm her or use heavy hands against her, and since that the case, they could only accept defeat without any chance of victory at all.

Kou Zhong hastily said, “Yu Yi [Aunt Yu], please set your heart at ease; from now on we will never mention that Niang had taught us the Great Method of Nine Mysteries, is that all right?”

Fu Junyu scolded tenderly, “Who’s your, two Han dogs, Yu Yi?”

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong knew she would make her move any time, so they were instantly in full alert.

Who would have thought that Fu Junyu appeared to be in deep thought again? It was quite a while later that she finally spoke nonchalantly, “All right! Looking at Shijie’s face, I am willing to spare you two from death; but there are two conditions.”

Seeing things have turned to the better, the two boys promptly inquired.

Fu Junyu coldly looked at the two boys up and down several times before speaking calmly, “First of all you must swear an oath never to reveal the secret of ‘Duke Yang Treasure’ to anybody, but you must tell me the treasure’s location.”

Xu Ziling had no problem, but Kou Zhong was stunned on the spot; that treasure concerned his grand plan for vying over the world, how could he tell others?

Fu Junyu continued, “The second condition is that I must take your martial art skill back, our Yijian Pai’s core technique must not be disseminated to Han

people.”

Kou Zhong breathed a sigh of relief instead.

He was originally afraid that Xu Ziling would force him to accept the first condition. But now Fu Junyu wanted to cripple them by taking their martial art skill, naturally they could not accept that. Thereupon, with a cold snort he said, “If you are really Niang’s martial sister, how could you not know the secret of ‘Duke Yang Treasure’? I almost fell into your ruse.”

Xu Ziling sighed inwardly; he knew that because of his desire to vie over the world, Kou Zhong completely disregarded the fact that Fu Junyu was their Niang’s martial sister.

Fu Junyu was exceptionally calm; as if she was talking to herself, she sighed softly and said, “I knew Han dogs are like this; Shijie, how could you be so muddleheaded?”

‘Qiang!’

Fu Junyu’s sword already moved into her hand, while at the same time she flew up and over the two boys’ head and landed in front of the cabin door before turning around to face them. She looked at the two boys with disdain and said, “Let me see how much martial art skill Shijie imparted to you!”

Her movement was swift beyond belief, like moving clouds and flowing water, her posture beautiful; her skill appeared to be superior to Fu Junchuo, who was adept at lightness-skill.

Kou Zhong drew the ‘Moon the the Well’ saber, and adopted a defense stance; he shouted loudly, “Niang! We are cornered and have no choice, please do not blame child.”

Xu Ziling knew that Kou Zhong was speaking those words for his sake.

While looking up, he was aghast to see that far ahead upstream, a sharp bend

appeared on the river course. However, he was helpless because Fu Junyu was blocking the path toward the rudder.

Fu Junyu's pretty face was still as calm as still water, but her pair of beautiful eyes shone with deep, determined murderous aura. The sword in front of her was vibrating lightly, exuding wave after wave of sword qi, forcing the two boys to circulate their internal energy to withstand it.

Kou Zhong took a step forward and raised his saber horizontally in front of his chest in ready-to-strike posture. He spoke coldly, "Saber and sword are heartless, it would be better for Shiyi to think thrice."

Fu Junyu mocked him, "Didn't you say I was an impostor? Why do you keep on calling me Shiyi?"

Kou Zhong replied while maintaining his heroic spirit; he laughed aloud and said, "Why don't Shiyi think about it yourself? The fact was that Niang did not have time to tell us the treasure's location before she died, so now you can only take our martial art skill back, but we certainly won't wait helplessly for death. Since things have come to this, let us look at Shiyi's real skill!"

Before he even finished talking, Fu Junyu was already about five chi away on his left, swinging her sword swiftly toward Kou Zhong's left shoulder; her speed was indeed like a ghost or demon.

Kou Zhong has never seen anybody with shenfa faster than Fu Junyu's. Yet he remained calm and unhurried as he raised his saber to block. He did not rely on naked eye, but on the almost psychic sense he developed from the Secret to Long Life.

Xu Ziling was also startled by her speed.

When Fu Junyu was floating, it was as if she turned into light smoke, as if she was without any substance.

'Bing!'

The saber and the sword collided.

Kou Zhong's tiger body was severely shaken; he had to stagger two steps sideways before he could stabilize his footing.

Fu Junyu floated onto the edge of the boat, but she suddenly flashed toward Kou Zhong's right side, and in an instant she slashed her sword down five times.

Each slash of the sword did not have Kou Zhong as its target, yet Kou Zhong was flustered trying to parry each strike, puzzling Xu Ziling, who was watching the fight.

Fu Junyu's leg suddenly flew out, the tip of her boot was going to sting Kou Zhong's calf, while Kou Zhong was straining left and right to parry her attack, demonstrating her forte in executing extremely cunning and strange changes.

Kou Zhong roared sharply; like a swimming fish he moved toward Fu Junyu's right side from an angle that was totally beyond the opponent's expectation. Not only he evaded her absolutely brilliant kick, but at the same time he backhandedly swept his saber toward Fu Junyu's right flank.

Evidently Fu Junyu was taken by surprise. She dodged the incoming saber, swiveled her body around, and moved toward Kou Zhong's back.

From her flank, Kou Zhong's 'Moon in the Well' saber went down, forcing Fu Junyu to float away again.

Suddenly Fu Junyu flashed toward Xu Ziling, waving her hand around, so that the fingers turned into several dozen cold points shooting toward him.

Xu Ziling sighed, realizing that after testing Kou Zhong's power, she was afraid the two boys would join hands against her, plus she noticed that Xu Ziling was without any weapon, so she wanted to deal with him first before turning back to deal with Kou Zhong.

Kou Zhong roared, "This Poniang is ruthless and formidable, Xiao Ling, you must not hold your hands!"

Like a big eagle Xu Ziling had already surged diagonally forward, using the edge of his palm like a saber, he hacked down on the flat of the opponent's sword.

Two qi collided.

While Fu Junyu was overwhelmed with amazement that Xu Ziling dared to meet the attack empty-handedly, also that he was able to pinpoint the exact location of her sword amidst the sword shadows and the blade rays, and was able to brilliantly neutralize her attack, Xu Ziling had already moved behind her back and bumped her with his shoulder.

She had never heard about this kind of fighting.

However, she had already tested these two boys' internal strength; although it was incredibly strange, it was still two notches below her seventh level of the Great Method of Nine Mysteries. Thereupon, while saying inwardly that you are just courting death, she also pushed her back to meet Xu Ziling's attack.

'Bang!'

Xu Ziling spurted a mouthful of fresh blood; like a kite with cut string he flew away to the other side.

Kou Zhong was at the ready; he was one step ahead to be at the place where Xu Ziling was about to fall, and raised his hands to catch him up.

Fu Junyu was also jolted by Xu Ziling's reaction force that she staggered three steps forward, with streams of true qi invading her body, creating unbearable discomfort that she almost threw up blood like Xu Ziling.

But she was actually delighted instead of alarmed; suppressing her injury, she turned around and shot her long sword like a lightning toward Xu Ziling's back, hoping that she would skewer the two boys' together in one move, and dispose

of them ruthlessly.

What she did not know was that Kou Zhong had already transmitted his true qi into Xu Ziling's body, dissolving his injury. This moment the two boys suddenly separated, Kou Zhong let out a violent roar, the 'Moon in the Well' hacked down on the enemy.

Xu Ziling sent out a punch, the target was her right shoulder.

Caught off guard, Fu Junyu screamed; the sword in her right hand parried Kou Zhong's long saber, her left palm clenched into a fist, she simultaneously took the two boys' 'toppling the mountains and overturning the seas' attack head-on.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were jarred to the left and right, but Fu Junyu also spewed a little bit of blood. She soared into the air, landed on the viewing platform first, and then with a somersault she flew toward the left bank. Her tender voice came through, "Some day I will take your lives, but now I will let you live a bit longer!"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had just steadied their footing.

'Boom!'

The salt boat crashed onto the reef standing in great numbers along the beach, jolting the two boys that they rolled around on the floor, battered and completely exhausted.

Book 7 Chapter 3 – General Assembly In Bamboo Forest

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong crouched on a pile of rocks by the beach, staring blankly at the salt boat tilted at 45 degree, wedged between the reefs; they wanted to cry, but no tears came out.

The sail mast was broken, a long, large gash opened up on the hull from the sharp reef scraping at the bottom of the boat.

Even if someone were able to take the salt boat off the reef, it would still be difficult to repair the vessel.

When they set off, they were filled with heroic spirit; who could have guessed that before they even reached Jiangdu, the boat was destroyed, their men went missing; the blow they experience was understandable.

The two boys lost their interest, they did not feel like hauling the salt down the boat.

Kou Zhong said with a wry smile, “Before we graduate our first disciples, our boat is already destroyed; this does not seem to be a good omen.”

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “After daybreak, we’ll search along the river, to see if we can find their bodies and give them proper burial.”

Kou Zhong hatefully punched both fists into the air, with an angry humph he said, “That Poniang does not deserve to be Niang’s Shimei, her character and

broad-mindedness fall too short compared to Niang's, she refuses to understand that there are also good and bad among Han people, she only knows to call us Han dogs."

Xu Ziling said, "Thinking about how much suffering the common people of Gaoli had to endure under Yang Guang troops' iron hoof, we can't really blame her for that. Ay!"

Kou Zhong coldly said, "Listening to the tone of your voice, when we meet her next time, even if we have the chance, you might treat her leniently. Don't you think Duan Yucheng and the others died an unjust death?"

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "Do you think killing her is that easy? Fighting one-on-one, we are still a level below her. This Poniang's qinggong is really formidable."

Kou Zhong dejectedly said, "How's your internal injury?"

Xu Ziling replied, "Although our martial art skill is still not enough, our healing technique is actually incomparable under the heavens. A moment ago I was aching all over, but now I am completely all right."

Kou Zhong roused himself; he laughed and said, "Xiao Ling is really exceptional; if it weren't for you bumping her back, I am afraid we were still unable to injure her. And if we weren't able to injure her, it would mean we were going to get injured or killed. Thinking about it, it was extremely risky and dangerous."

Xu Ziling knitted his brows in deep thought, "But her Yijian technique is really quite profound. Sword battle is just like playing chess, the battlefield is the chessboard. How would we know if the next move is 'double rook seize the warrior', or 'abandon the rook to protect the commander'?" [not sure about this, must be some reference to Chinese chess.]

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "They must be referring to Gaoli chess, don't think too much about it!"

Xu Ziling seriously said, "Speaking about chess, the principle of chess is the same as the principle of mental cultivation. First of all we must see through the opponent's opening [in chess], only then can we decide how to attack or defend, to advance or retreat. Formerly we only know how to counter every move; 'the troops arrive we resist' really can't be considered first-class martial art principle."

Kou Zhong was about to reply when suddenly they heard unusual noise coming from downstream. Focusing their senses to listen carefully, unexpectedly it was Duan Yucheng and the others, four men's familiar footsteps.

The two boys were pleased beyond their expectation; they rushed forward to meet them. After the calamity, renewed life, there was only joy in their hearts.

Turned out Fu Junyu was being lenient to them; before tossing them into the Great River, she unsealed their acupoints first. Whether they wanted it or not, Kou and Xu's ill feelings toward her was greatly reduced.

Pulling themselves together, they moved the sacks of salt from the broken ship to the shore and hid them in the jungle. They also chopped the broken boat into pieces of boards and logs, and floated the pieces along the river.

By daybreak, the surface of the river was back to normal, as if this matter had never happened.

After being tossed from side to side all night, Duan Yucheng and the others, four men were exhausted. Thereupon Kou Zhong ordered them to rest in the jungle, while also guarding the salt. In the meantime, he and Xu Ziling went to the nearby town to see whether they could by a mule cart to transport the goods.

When the two boys reached the official road, Xu Ziling said, "You are proficient in astronomy and geography, tell me which way to go."

Kou Zhong confidently said with a laugh, "I knew you wouldn't let me off. We have just left Changsu the day before yesterday, plus we hid for half a day, so we should not have reached Jiangyin yet. If mountain people's guess is correct, if we

walk to the west for a couple of sichen, we should reach Jiangyin! Ha ha! Are you convinced?”

Xu Ziling sneered and said, “Are we there yet? Just use your feet, not your mouth!”

The two boys unfolded their shenfa, and sure enough, less than a sichen later the city of Jiangyin appeared in the distance.

Kou Zhong said triumphantly, “When you come with me, you won’t make a pointless trip. I was just wondering Jiangyin city nowadays has fallen into whose hands?”

Xu Ziling looked up at a caravan of horses and mules going down the hill heading toward Jiangyin; he laughed and said, “Can’t you go up and ask?”

Kou Zhong bumped into him and with hee hee ha ha he ran down the hill. Xu Ziling ran after him. But when they were about to reach the caravan, the people of the caravan shouted repeatedly, telling them to stop.

Five or six riders from the caravan reined their horses and turned back to block them. An old man who appeared to be their leader shouted, “Who’s there!”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly surprised; why did they act nervous and tense as if they were facing an enemy?

The two boys had no choice but to stop. Kou Zhong cupped his fist and said, “Gentlemen, Lao Ge [old elder brothers] please do not misunderstand, we, two brothers, only wanted to inquire about the situation of Jiangyin, to see if it is safe to enter the city.”

A middle age man with thick eyebrows and big eyes next to the old man nodded and said, “You don’t look like vicious disciples of Tieqi Hui [armored horses society]. What is it that you wanted to ask?”

Kou Zhong suddenly understood, “Turns out Lao Ge mistook us as Tieqi Hui

men.” And then elbowing Xu Ziling, he went on, “Do you know who is the leader of the Tieqi Hui? Could it be that he took the name ‘Xiao’ [little]?”

Those several men under the leadership of the old men laughed; they understood that Kou Zhong deliberately made fun of the name Ren Shaoming. Immediately the distance between the two sides diminished considerably.

[Translator’s note: this is hard to carry over to English. Ren – to take/appoint/assume, Shao – few/less/junior, Ming – name/famous. Kou Zhong said ‘took the name xiao’ – ren xiao ming.]

Tieqi Hui was one of eight-gang ten-society. In the recent years they emerged suddenly to become a big underworld gang in the Jiangnan [south of Yangtze river] area. Their Bangzhu [gang leader] ‘Green Dragon’ Ren Shaoming was an expert in using the meteor hammer. Together with the Huizhu [society leader] of Poyang Hui, Lin Shihong, who recently called himself the Emperor of Chu, they were known as the Two Hegemons of Jiangnan, the two dominant figures [orig. whose foot’s move sways the balance] of the Wulin world of Jiangnan.

[Translator’s note: here the ‘dragon’ (蛟 jiao) is legendary dragon with the ability to control rain and floods, not the usual 龙/龍 (long).]

It was rumored that other than losing to the Song Clan’s Heavenly Saber Song Que in a fight over territorial dispute, Ren Shaoming had never met a well-matched adversary. From this, it could be seen that he was indeed exceptional.

The old man laughed and said, “You, this kid, have a bit of courage and insight; so which Sect’s disciples are you?”

Kou Zhong put on a respectful look as he said solemnly, “We, two brothers Fu Zhong and Fu Ling are the seventh generation disciples of Zhuhua Bang [bamboo flower gang]; Yan Kuan is our grandpa [or ‘master’].”

The old man was stunned, “The Yan Kuan who was martyred due to his loyalty in Yangzhou?” he asked.

This time it was Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling’s turn to look at each other in dismay.

First, they did not expect that the old man would know such an insignificant character like Yan Kuan; second, how did Yan Laoda become a martyr due to his loyalty?

The man with thick eyebrows who had spoken earlier suddenly made a secret signal, which only Zhuhua Bang's member could understand.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling hastily returned the politeness with another Zhuhua Bang's secret signal.

All the six men opened their robe at the same time, exposing the Zhuhua Bang insignia on the lapel of their clothes. It was only then did Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong realize that they had come across 'one of their own'.

However, even when they were still in Yangzhou Yan Laoda and the two boys were intermingling with various characters of the Zhuhua Bang, they had not reached enough seniority to have a bamboo tree, which was the formal low level insignia of Zhuhua Bang disciples, embroidered on the lapel of their clothes; let alone this moment.

Kou Zhong awkwardly said, "Three years ago, in order to hide from the authorities, we, two brothers, wandered around everywhere, hey!"

"We understand," the big man said, "Yan Kuan was the first faithful martyr from our Gang who was killed by that muddleheaded ruler; if you did not flee, your lives would not be guaranteed."

The old man showed a doubtful look, "Since you are Zhuhua Bang disciples, how come you did not recognize Laofu [old man, referring to self]?"

Noticing that the insignia embroidered on the old man's clothes was eight wind bamboo [not sure, this is literal translation], Kou Zhong knew that this man must be of Hall Master level. He had a brainwave and said, "Could it be Wind Bamboo Hall's Tangzhu [Hall Master] Shen Beichang, Shen Ye [master Shen]?" Pulling Xu Ziling along, they hastily performed the ritual of saluting a Hall Master.

The old man stroked the long beard under his chin; he laughed aloud, “You are indeed one of our own,” he said, “This time you came here, was it because you heard the news and came to participate in our Gang’s ‘General Assembly in Bamboo Forest’?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged glances again; could it be that they had come across another lucky coincidence?

Zhuhua Bang was one of those gangs with tight organizational structure. Under the Bangzhu, there was one Junshi [military advisor], followed by Wind, Clear, Rain and Dew, four Halls. Under them were Duoazhu [helmsman], Xiangzhu [fragrant master] and the Gang disciples. ‘General Assembly in the Bamboo Forest’ was the highest assembly of the Gang, except in case of an emergency, it was held only once every three years.

Kou Zhong turned to the man with thick eyebrows and said, “My guess is Daye must be Wind Bamboo Hall’s Deputy Hall Master, Lou Feng Daye!”

Lou Feng had a rather favorable impression on these two boys; he said, “Let’s talk after we are inside the city!”

Along the way Kou and Xu, two boys figured out what was going on. Turned out after the muddleheaded ruler was killed, Yangzhou fell into Li Zitong’s hands, Zhuhua Bang elected new Gang Leader at Danyang, but then Jianghuai Army attacked Danyang, Junshi Shao Lingzhou seized that opportunity to lead the Gang to occupy Jiangyin. Although in term of power they were far inferior to Li Zitong, Shen Faxing, and the like, it was enough for them to become a local power.

Recently all local powers were trying to pull them apart, notably the most active one was Tieqi Hui who occupied Wuxi and Jinling, south and southwest of Jiangyin, respectively.

Tieqi Hui Leader Ren Shaoming was even openly trying to lure the Hall Masters of Clear Bamboo Hall, Rain Bamboo Hall, and Dew Bamboo Hall, three halls; time and again he sabotaged the Gang Leader election. His intention was to absorb the ‘dragon without a head’ Zhuhua Bang and incorporate it under Tieqi Hui

banner.

The ‘General Assembly in Bamboo Forest’ this time was Junshi Shao Lingzhou’s initiative, supported by Shen Beichang, to discuss the effort to counter Ren Shaoming and the three other Halls’ renegades’ operation, while hoping that they would be able to elect new Gang Leader in the assembly.

In this journey, Shen Beichang and the others have suffered repeated Tieqi Hui attacks, and have lost close to a hundred men; hence the reason they were nervous and tensed.

During their Yangzhou days, other than Yan Laoda, practically nobody knew that these two boys’ names were Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling. They only knew the two boys as Little Zhong and Little Ling; naturally nobody knew that Yan Kuan was implicated and was killed because of them, they thought that Yan Kuan was martyred because he dared to oppose the muddleheaded ruler. Only Kou and Xu, two boys, were aware that Yan Kuan and martyrdom had nothing to do with each other.

Among the caravan, there was a carriage with its curtains hung down, and it was guarded particularly strictly. With ‘glancing knock, sideways stroke’ Kou Zhong was trying to find out the identity of the person inside the carriage, but all he obtained was the reprimand of the Deputy Hall Master, Lou Feng.

In the city, the two boys followed the Wind Bamboo Hall people into the Wind Bamboo Hall mansion house in the town center. Taking advantage while Shen Beichang and Luo Feng went to see Junshi Shao Wuzhuo [sic], the two boys slipped out into the street.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “This Shao Wuzhuo is indeed a talent; just look how he govern the city that everything in Jiangyin is clear and orderly, the chaos outside does not seem to affect this place.”

Watching the bustling scene of people coming and going, Xu Ziling agreed, “The south has always been bountiful, plus Jiangyin is the connecting fort at the mouth of Yangtze River to the ocean; as long as their production capability is not destroyed, the people can live in peace and work happily.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had changed their clothes into Gang uniform with a single bamboo embroidered on them, the insignia of the lowest level Gang disciples. This moment they saw five or six Zhuhua Bang disciples were walking in their direction while talking loudly among themselves; hurriedly the two boys made a hand signal to show their respect.

When those several people saw that the two boys' insignia was of the Wind Bamboo, they snorted repeatedly and simply left without paying them any attention.

Kou and Xu, two boys were taken aback; it was only then did they realize that those people did not belong to the Wind Bamboo Hall, and that the struggle among the four Halls was clearly very intense.

They found a restaurant and took a seat, the waiter stepped forward and politely welcomed them.

After the waiter left, Xu Ziling frowned and said, "Zhong Shao, you seem to forget why we are here?"

Kou Zhong smiled apologetically and said, "If I randomly fabricated some words, you will definitely accuse me of being not honest enough. The bottom line is that we are now considered Zhuhua Bang people, and now Zhuhua Bang is in distress as they are on the brink of annexation, we should really spend a bit of effort to help!"

Xu Ziling sneered and said, "You are just thinking of taking Tieqi Hui's place and take over Zhuhua Bang for yourself!"

Kou Zhong said, "How could you consider it the same thing? Ren Shaoming is a big rotten-egg of the dark road [i.e. criminal], but I, Kou Zhong am a good man who in all respects conduct myself in consideration of other people's needs. If Zhuhua Bang fell into my hands, it would be their good fortune. One lifetime two brothers, will you or will you not help me?"

This moment the waiter came to offer some pastries, but he lingered at their

table. "I wonder if both masters belong to Wind Bamboo Hall," he asked respectfully.

Kou Zhong was surprised, "What's the matter?" he asked.

The waiter said, "As long as you are Wind Bamboo Hall or Shao Junzhi's men, we will serve you free of charge. But Daye [big master] must not let Ren Shaoming prevail!" And then he left, deeply worried and sick at heart.

Xu Ziling stared blankly for half a day, and then he sighed and said, "Very well!"

Kou Zhong was pleased beyond his expectation. "General Assembly in Bamboo Forest will start tonight; we are going to see the opportunity and act accordingly!"

Recalling Duan Yucheng and the others, four men, Xu Ziling was about to speak when they heard a chuckle and someone spoke, "You, two boys are unexpectedly here!"

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong jumped in fright and turned their gaze toward the door. To their surprise, it was Gui Xiliang, who had risen to the Fragrant Master position, the guy the two boys used to hang around with. Next to him was another familiar face, also someone whom they hang around with, Xing Rong. This kid was slim, his hands and feet looked lithe, and seemed to be rather cunning.

The four of them saw each other; naturally it was a very happy occasion. The two boys were happy and they found it amusing that Gui Xiliang was putting an air as a fragrant master.

Xing Rong knitted his brows and said, "Since when did you become Wind Bamboo Hall people?"

"You did not steal someone else's clothes, did you?" Gui Xiliang asked suspiciously.

Gui and Xing, two men's clothes had bamboo flower embroidered on the lapel, showing that they were direct subordinate of their Gang Leader, but since they currently did not have Gang Leader, naturally they were under Junshi Shao Lingzhou's command.

Seeing the long saber hanging on Kou Zhong's back, Xing Rong happily said, "Watching you two with glowing faces, I don't know where you stole the weapon from, but you must be mingling with the right crowd!"

Xu Ziling self-deprecatingly said, "Why stop with 'right'? He practically had grand style. Zhong Shao practically held hands and drank wine together with Zhai Rang, Du Fuwei, and the likes; don't you think it was impressive enough?"

"Tsk, tsk," Xing Rong repeatedly clucked his tongue, but his face showed that he was scorning Xu Ziling for boasting groundlessly.

Kou Zhong reached out to pat Xing Rong's shoulder; he said with a laugh, "You must not be that jealous."

Xing Rong laughed, but pushed his hand aside, and heaved a deep sigh.

"Don't brag," Gui Xiliang said, "Remember that we are among brothers, you come with me from now on! Tonight after Shao Junshi becomes Bangzhu, I will report to him about you."

Kou Zhong made a non-committal remark; and then he asked, "Are you sure Shao Junshi will become Bangzhu?"

Xing Rong replied, "In terms of popularity, capacity, status, and martial art skill, no one in our Gang can consider Shao Junshi is second to anybody, but the situation is not that simple."

Gui Xiliang spoke in an authoritative tone, "Nowadays everybody wants to stick their foot in our 'General Assembly in Bamboo Forest'; they ought to know Ren Shaoming, that treacherous bandit's behavior, plus that thief is now in cahoots with Lin Shihong. The situation is not too optimistic."

Xing Rong said, "Luckily Shao Junshi obtained the Song Clan's support; otherwise Ren Shaoming and Lin Shihong would be even more unbridled."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged glances; their eyes lit up. "The Song Clan?" they asked, "Who are they sending to support him?"

Gui Xiliang frowned and said, "How could you inquire about such confidential information? We are going back to Junshi Mansion; are you coming or not?"

Kou Zhong stood up while pulling Xu Ziling along, and said, "Naturally we will follow Gui Xiangzhu [fragrant master] to increase our knowledge."

Xing Rong objected, "But we have not had our fill yet, why would you stand up so quickly?"

Kou Zhong giggled and said, "But we are already full; let us go outside first and wait respectfully for two days."

They had just stepped out of the door, the same bunch of young men from the Rain Bamboo Hall they saw earlier crowded in; they intentionally bumped the two boys aside, clearly they were trying to pick a fight.

However, the two boys were familiar with this kind of situation; they refused to be provoked.

Outside the door, Kou Zhong excitedly said in a low voice, "This is getting more and more interesting. Let us strike a friendship with Shao Lingzhou during the assembly, and then see where things go from there."

Xu Ziling knitted his brows and said, "I just think that this matter is too troublesome, plus it is also not something we would receive any benefit from, nor is it something that we could do."

Kou Zhong raised his clenched fist in front of his eyes and said, "Under similar circumstances, it would be difficult for us to be of any use; being mere two kids

would not suit us well. However, it has become clear right now that whoever has harder fist would get the chance to speak. Don't you think that we have a great opportunity here?"

Xu Ziling grumpily stared at him for a moment. Suddenly the sound of bowls and cups falling to the ground and shattered followed by the sound of people shouting and cursing was heard from inside the restaurant.

The two boys were staring blankly at each other; could it be that the Rain Bamboo Hall people dare to violate their Gang's rule by starting a fight with Gui Xiliang, two people?

Book 7 Chapter 4 – Meeting Face To Face On A Narrow Path

Gui Xiliang and Xing Rong were forced into a corner, with the latter was wounded in the left arm and blood was still trickling down from the wound; evidently they were at a disadvantageous position.

The other guests, as well as the waiters, were crowding the wall on the kitchen side; everybody appeared to be outraged, but nobody dared to speak up.

As soon as Kou and Xu, two boys entered the hall, two Rain Bamboo Hall disciples guarding the door pointed their finger at them and shouted, “You, two small fry, get lost! You have no place to speak up in here.”

Seeing an old friend injured, Xu Ziling let out a cold snort and strode forward.

A sword flashed; one of Rain Bamboo Hall men slashing his sword toward Xu Ziling’s left shoulder.

Xu Ziling had not even reacted, Kou Zhong’s leg flew out.

‘Bang!’

The man was kicked heavily that the sword flew off his hand and his body flew backward and crashed heavily on a chair; immediately the sound of splintering wood was heard.

Everybody in the hall was shocked.

The other five Rain Bamboo Hall men were scared out of their wits by Kou Zhong's display of prowess; they all retreated to one side, opening up a gap between the two sides, with each side has received disadvantage from the opponent.

Gui Xiliang and Xing Rong looked at Kou and Xu, two boys in disbelief.

Kou Zhong cupped his fist and said, "Gui Xiangzhu, how would you like subordinate to handle these renegades who dared to offend their superior?"

A strong and muscular man, who seemed to be the leader of these Rain Bamboo Hall men shouted, "What do you mean offending superior? I, Bai Rong, am a Rain Bamboo Hall Xiangzhu, under the order of Tangzhu [hall master] Luo Xian to invite Gui Xiangzhu to have a talk with us. You two are the ones who are offending your superior."

Gui Xiliang looked at the enemy, who were still struggling to crawl up from the floor, and spoke in a heavy voice, "Do you need a blade to invite me to talk?"

Kou Zhong pointed his finger to Bai Rong and said with a laugh, "In this matter, Bai Xiangzhu is wrong. All right! How about we tie them up and wait for Luo Tangzhu to come and be the judge between us, to see who's right and who's wrong."

Bai Rong gave an eye signal, immediately two of his men charged forward, brandishing their saber to hack on Kou Zhong.

This time Xu Ziling let out a cold snort and stepped in front of Kou Zhong. Slapping rapidly to the left and to the right, he pushed the two blades aside, and then taking a step forward he punched the two men's lower abdomen.

The two men were thrown back from the strike, and crashed onto Bai Rong, so that the three of them rolled down on the floor like a gourd, in a very sorry condition. The rest of their men stayed quiet out of fear, and even more scared

to make any move.

Gui Xiliang and Xing Rong could only stare blankly with mouth agape. In just a short period of time he was already overwhelmed with a whole new level of respect toward these two boys.

Kou Zhong calmly clapped his hands and said, “Well? Do you want to create havoc at the Rain Bamboo Hall and take down Luo Da Tangzhu’s [big/great hall master] power and prestige? If Gui Xiangzhu does not wish to go, just let us, the two small fry, do it for you.”

Gui Xiliang was silent; he signaled Xing Rong with his eyes, and then forcefully pulled Kou and Xu to the street and said, “Let’s go back to Junshi Mansion first and talk about it.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling knew that he was scared; they had no choice but to smile wryly and come with him.

Like most cities in Jiangnan, the river became the link between Jiangyin City and the four rural areas outside the city; the river also formed the skeleton of the town layout.

The houses along the river were whitewashed, the ones facing the water had their walls and windows reflecting the ripples, painting a fresh and clean artwork like scenery of the patchwork of waterways. Rows of water lanes interspersed with small bridges, small boats carrying people in beautiful silk dress; a touchingly beautiful spring scenery.

Junshi Mansion was originally the Jiangyin’s provincial military governor mansion, it was located at the town center, the confluence of the river courses. Right in front of the main gate there was a big bridge spanning across the river lining the Junshi Mansion, so that the entire building complex looked even more imposing.

Comparatively speaking, the south was more calm and peaceful than the north. Due to the influx of northerners who fled to the south to avoid calamity, Jiangyin appeared to be even more bustling and flourishing.

In troubled times, it is easily understandable that the common people did not wish to see any changes within the Zhuhua Bang.

Even though Xu Ziling also did not wish to be drawn into this kind of power struggle and territorial dispute, he still felt that he ought to prevent Tieqi Hui, whose evil reputation has spread far and wide, from taking over Zhuhua Bang.

As Gui Xiliang was leading the two boys crossing the bridge, they came across trouble.

Mai Yunfei, another fragrant master who was in guard duty that day, who was also the head disciple of Military Adviser Shao Lingzhou, with a rather handsome and dignified look, as well as an arrogant and conceited individual, stared hard at Kou and Xu, two boys, and said, "Shifu's order, from now on, no stranger is allowed inside Junshi Mansion."

Gui Xiliang suffered quite a loss of face in front of Kou Zhong, two people; but he was helpless. As a last attempt, he said, "These two were disciples of loyal martyr Yan Kuan, who in the past had bravely sacrificed his own life in Yangzhou. In recent years they roamed the Jianghu and have acquired good martial art skill. Just now they had beaten Rain Bamboo Hall's Bai Rong until he was in a sorry state; therefore, I was hoping to introduce them to Shao Junshi and recommend them for promotion."

Mai Yunfei condescendingly swept his gaze over the two boys, assuming an understanding look, he shook his head and said, "You can do that tonight."

Gui Xiliang helplessly pulled the two boys to the side and said, "Let me go inside to see Shao Junshi first, and then I'll come to get you two and take you in."

Xing Rong groaning apologetically and said, "Mai Yunfei relies on his position as Shao Junshi's first disciple, plus he is Shao Lanfang's lover, so he has always been riding roughshod over people, especially to us, who used to be the late Bangzhu's attendants. Sooner or later we will have him fall head first."

Gu Xiliang knew he was not Mai Yunfei's match, so pulling Xing Rong aside he

said, "Don't talk nonsense, let's go in first and talk later. You two wait for us here."

After the two men left, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling walked over to the rocky beach of the river at end of the bridge; just like in the past, like a couple of marketplace rogues they sprawled on the beach facing the water.

Kou Zhong looked at Mai Yunfei, who was guarding at the other side of the bridge, and said with a laugh, "That scoundrel Xiliang's luck does not seem to be too good; originally he had the opportunity to achieve meteoric success in his career, but the Bangzhu was slaughtered by the muddleheaded ruler. And now he is up against Mai Yunfei, who's butting head with him in all aspects, so that even to get inside the Mansion he had his hands and feet blocked. I wonder why would he still want to be this kind of Xiangzhu?"

But then he turned excited as he said, "Shao Lanfang is the most famous beauty in our Zhuhua Bang; we might as well rob Mai Yunfei's most cherished possession, so that he would die of anger."

Displeased, Xu Ziling said, "If you seduce somebody else's lover just for that reason, I will definitely not allow you to do that."

Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling's shoulder and laughed apologetically, "I was just kidding!" he said, "Xiao Ling, don't take it too seriously."

And then he changed the subject, "As a Xiangzhu plus the last disciple of the late Bangzhu, Xiliang's position is not low, on top of that he still has the support of the late Bangzhu's direct subordinates. Tell me, do you think he has a chance to be the new Bangzhu? Otherwise, Mai Yunfei would not squeeze him on purpose."

Xu Ziling was lying down, supporting his body with his elbows, enjoying the afternoon sun; hearing Kou Zhong, he was taken aback. "Xiliang's skill is too shallow," he said, "He is not qualified to be a gang leader, don't pull to the east and lead to the west, you are the one who wants to be the gang leader!"

Kou Zhong shook his head and said, "I really don't have that desire, plus it

won't work. Right now Li Mi's power is flourishing, if I became Zhuhua Bang's Longtou [lit. dragonhead, *i.e.* big boss], there is good chance Zhuhua Bang won't last a few days. But if Xiliang became the new Bangzhu, he only needs to rely on us for support, and then there won't be any difference to me becoming the Bangzhu."

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "If you want Xiliang to be the Bangzhu, I am afraid you will have to slaughter the current Junshi and all his cronies clean; are you that formidable?"

Kou Zhong looked down on the river water under his feet; he muttered, "That is really a bit difficult, but it is not impossible at all. The most important thing is that Xiliang was the late Bangzhu's disciple. This guy used to be very gutsy, but perhaps he has been bullied for a long time that he lost his confidence. Hmm!"

Xu Ziling spoke in low voice, "That Mai Yunfei is coming!"

Kou Zhong looked without raising his head; he saw Mai Yunfei, leading four of his men, walking away from the head of the bridge, following the rocky path toward the beach where they sat. Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Probably he is angered by Xiliang?"

Before Xu Ziling had any chance to respond, Mai Yunfei had already shouted from the distance, "You, these two kids, are sitting and lying down in front of the Junshi Mansion like that; whatever next? Quickly go back to the Hall where you belong!"

Xu Ziling did not react at all, he was still enjoying the sun with his eyes closed.

Kou Zhong squinting his eyes looking at him and said, "Mai Xiangzhu, I was wondering if you are deaf, and did not hear Gui Xiangzhu ordering us to wait for him here? You quickly go back to the place you are supposed to guard."

Mai Yunfei's countenance underwent a drastic change, while the four hunting dogs behind him rushed out to close in on the two boys on the riverbank; very imposing.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “What? You want to fight?”

Mai Yunfei was so angry that his handsome face turned green; he gravely said, “Stand up!”

Still calm and unruffled Kou Zhong said, “Since you are not the Bangzhu, and you are not our grandpa, what makes you think you can order us around?”

Mai Yunfei could not hold back anymore. “Throw them into the river!” he bellowed.

The four men was about to make their move, Xu Ziling threw himself backward on the sand; fast as lightning his hands reached out to grab the ankles of the two men behind him.

Under Mai Yunfei and the others’ utter shock, plus nobody knew what technique Xu Ziling used, the two men were thrown overhead, and ‘Splash!’ they landed in the river, and immediately struggled hard to crawl onto the opposite bank.

Amidst the shouting and yelling, more than a dozen Zhuhua Bang disciples who were guarding the Mansion at the other end of the bridge rushed over.

‘Qiang!’ Mai Yunfei and the other two men drew their sword, but instead of charging forward, they retreated. Apparently they were waiting for the rest of the men to arrive before they dared to make their move.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and sprang up, his long saber left its scabbard and in one fluid motion hacked down on Mai Yunfei.

Mai Yunfei raised his sword horizontally to block.

‘Dang!’

Kou Zhong's 'Moon in the Well' returned to its scabbard. Mai Yunfei staggered five steps back before he could steady his footings; his countenance turned unbearably ugly.

Meanwhile his reinforcement has arrived. They crowded behind him, but nobody dared to step forward to fight.

Xu Ziling also sprang up. Pointing to the other end of the bridge, he said, "Someone's coming, you don't mind your proper business, but are engrossed in bullying your own people. If that is not dereliction of duty, then what is it?"

It was only then did Mai Yunfei caught his breath back; he was fighting hard to suppress his continuously surging blood and qi provoked by Kou Zhong's saber power. Along with his men, he turned his head around to see, and indeed there were a group of about a dozen riders galloping along the street heading toward the head of the bridge.

Only after giving the two boys a vicious look and said, "I will settle the score with you later," did he lead his men to hurry back over the bridge.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other and burst out in laughter. The former shook his head and sighed, "Why are there so many people who love to ride roughshod over others in the world?"

The sound of hoof beats was getting closer.

The two boys looked over and were stunned.

Because one of the riders turned and galloped toward them, on the horseback was astoundingly the beautiful and energetic young lady of the Song Clan, Song Yuzhi.

This beauty with unique style reined her horse and stopped. Arrogantly and coldly she looked at the two boys from head to toes several times. Finally her eyes landed on the Wind Bamboo insignia embroidered on the lapel of their clothes. Knitting her jet-black eyebrows, she said, "You, these two drifters, why

do you suddenly become a single bamboo [level] disciple of the Zhuhua Bang?
Are you conspiring against the law?"

Although the other people did not come over, their attention was fixed on the situation over here.

Kou Zhong smiled slightly and said, "Come! Let me do the introduction: this is Miss High and Mighty Song Yuzhi." And then wrapping his arm around Xu Ziling's shoulder and pulled him closer, he said, "My brother Xu Ziling; he looks handsome enough, right?"

Seeing him giving her an irrelevant answer, plus he was mocking her, Song Yuzhi's jade countenance fell. Feigning disdain she shot a glance toward Xu Ziling. A weird expression appeared suddenly in her eyes, but just as sudden it died out. And then with a tender snort she said, "Seeing that you have not committed any wicked conduct, I want you to leave town immediately. Otherwise, with just one word from me, don't even think that you can leave town alive."

Kou Zhong slapped his own forehead, hard. "Xiaodi [little brother, referring to self] nearly forget," he said, "Our, two brothers' heads are extremely valuable. Song Xiaojie [young lady], please go ahead and give your word! Let's see how many people we can drag down to accompany us to the grave."

Amazingly enough Song Yuzhi did not get angry. After staring at Kou Zhong for half a day, she finally turned to Xu Ziling and said, "I advise you and your brother to leave together! If people knew you are here, they might give you gargantuan problem."

Xu Ziling has never had any good opinion on arrogant, precious daughters of lofty family and big clan; he felt that those girls would always look down upon ordinary men. He replied indifferently, "We are basically not afraid of anybody; otherwise, we won't be here talking to Miss Song."

Song Yuzhi sighed and said, "Although you have made a little name for yourself, but compared to Li Mi you are still far too inferior. Well, just think about it!"

Kou Zhong asked in surprise, "Could it be that Miss Song has a high regard toward this handsome brother of mine? Why are you so amiable toward him, but toward me you are so stern and harsh? After all, the relationship between you and I ought to be a bit deeper."

Finally Song Yuzhi could not take it anymore. "Shut up!" she angrily said.

Kou Zhong giggled and pulled Xu Ziling away.

"Hold on!" Song Yuzhi's tender voice called out.

Already three or four riders galloped over toward them.

Kou Zhong let Xu Ziling go, he stopped abruptly, his hand already pressed on the hilt of his saber, his entire body stood up perfectly straight, his tiger eyes flashed with deep and unfathomable sharp gleam, his countenance became incomparably hard and callous, his entire being seemed to exude a terrifying, powerful grandeur.

Song Yuzhi suddenly felt that this instant Kou Zhong has completely turned into someone that she did not recognize, no longer like the kid who laughed and giggled in the past, but rather a hero, a towering figure who stood straight and wouldn't surrender in front of any storm, who would not be afraid of anybody.

But then, against all expectations, Kou Zhong suddenly broke into laughter, revealing a splendid, as bright as the sun, smile on his face. Shaking his head, he said with a sigh, "This won't do! How could I, Kou Zhong, be hard-hearted in front of Miss Song?"

Finished speaking, he laughed aloud and pulled Xu Ziling away.

Song Yuzhi was disconcerted by his dramatic change and the tone of his voice, as well as his demeanor, and his teasing, which were overflowing with youthful, masculine charisma. Unexpectedly she forgot to stop them.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling sat down against the wall in a quiet, secluded alley, just like back in Yangzhou, when they were still little rogues from the marketplace.

With a faint smile Xu Ziling said, “Zhong Shao, are you thinking of replacing Li Xiuning with her?”

Kou Zhong revealed a smile that showed that he had pondered it over; stretching himself, he spoke leisurely, “Love affair between boys and girls will only increase the burden in our mind. I don’t mind looking for a girl to have fun, but I will never let myself get emotionally involved. Our business is more important, other matters must be set aside. Teasing the haughty Song family’s Miss is all right, but don’t ever think that I, Kou Zhong, will want to be inconvenienced by fawning on her, by stooping down for her. Do you understand?”

“But what are we going to do now?” Xu Ziling asked.

Kou Zhong said, “We can either leave right now, or wait until tonight, when we can create his mother’s havoc in here. What do you say?”

Xu Ziling shrugged his shoulders, “I am certain my idea will be different than yours. In my opinion, we can’t manage, nor do we have the ability to mind the Zhuhua Bang’s affair. Not to mention Duan Yucheng and the others are still waiting for us. It is better to avoid unnecessary trouble. Don’t you think we have enough trouble of our own already?”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “Can you not have that much prejudice against me? When did I, Kou Zhong, ever dare not to esteem your, Ling Shao’s opinion? Just as you said, we’ll steal a mule cart and leave. Perhaps two mule carts will be enough.”

Xu Ziling looked doubtful, “Where can we steal mule carts from?” he asked.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Naturally from the Wind Bamboo Hall. They have that many mule carts, loaning two for our use shouldn’t be any problem. We can simply make any excuse, the mule carts will be ours immediately. Just

leave it to me.”

Xu Ziling was unhappy, “Shen Beichang and Luo Feng are very kind to us, how could we repay good with evil?”

“You are right,” Kou Zhong nodded, “In that case we’d better go take a look at the Rain Bamboo Hall. Since we already had enmity with them, adding one shouldn’t make any difference.”

Xu Ziling understood immediately; he smiled wryly and said, “You d@mn muddled-egg [i.e. scoundrel/b@stard], after going around and around, in the end you still want to create trouble, and then see if there is any opportunity to fish in troubled water.”

Kou Zhong roared in laughter, “Nobody knows me better than you do,” he said.

And then he pulled Xu Ziling hard and lowered his voice, “Just now Rain Bamboo Hall’s Hall Leader Luo Xian sent that Bai Rong to get Xiliang to Rain Bamboo Hall, there must be a conspiracy somewhere, so we might as well find out what it is. Hey! You can’t ignore Xiliang and Xing Rong’s two little lives, can you?”

“Do you know where Rain Bamboo Hall is?” Xu Ziling asked.

Kou Zhong replied, “When a sage does not know something, he would not feel ashamed to ask and learn from his subordinates, right? Don’t drag your feet, come on!”

Knowing he could not win against him, Xu Ziling helplessly followed Kou Zhong.

Book 7 Chapter 5 – Easy As Pie[1]

The two boys arrived in front of Rain Bamboo Hall's main gate. When the dozen or so doorkeepers noticed that they were Wind Bamboo Hall men, they immediately showed a hostile look, yet nobody really took these two boys seriously. Simply because among the Rain Bamboo Hall's disciples guarding the door, the lowest rank was still above the two boys' single bamboo level.

The number of bamboo determined their rank.

Bangzhu [Gang Leader] had ten bamboo sticks, Junshi [military counselor] nine, and below them were Tangzhu [Hall Leader], Fu Tangzhu [Deputy Hall Leader], Duoazhu [Helmsman], Xiangzhu [Fragrant Master], in decreasing number of bamboo sticks.

Previously, when the two boys were with Yan Kuan, they did not even have half a stick of bamboo, but now for no reason at all they were promoted to one bamboo stick.

The two boys walked side by side toward the main gate. Someone immediately shouted, "Wind Bamboo Hall kids, stop right there!"

'Qiang!' Kou Zhong drew his 'Moon in the Well'.

Xu Ziling pulled him aside and asked in surprise, "Why use blade?"

Kou Zhong's eyes flashed with freezing cold sharp rays, the tone of his voice was even colder that it made people's heart shivered as he spoke emotionlessly, "If I don't kill these renegade Gang members, how could Xiliang obtain the

Bangzhu position?”

Xu Ziling was shaken and let him go. A dozen or so guards also suddenly revealed their weapons and charged forward.

Right away miserable scream and painful grunt fell incessantly on the ear. Like a swimming fish Kou Zhong weaved in and out among the men, those who came in contact with his blade immediately had their blood splashed and they fell to the ground; unexpectedly no one was able to provide any resistance.

By the time Kou Zhong stepped over the gate into the courtyard behind the wall, the ground behind him was littered with fallen enemies; although their wound was serious, no one had a life-threatening injury, or even suffered any disaster of losing their limb or broken bones. It was awfully clear that his move was very well measured.

Xu Ziling could only stare blankly at him. Kou Zhong turned his head around and shrugged his shoulders, “If you don’t do this, who will fear you? Come! My Ling Shaoye!”

One in front of another, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling attacked their way into the Rain Bamboo Hall, those who tried to block them were swept by the wind, the disciples were beaten to a sorry state, and scampered off like wolves with their tails between their hind legs.

Although the two boys made their debut not too long ago, they were already battle-hardened, even hard fighting with magnificent army with thousands of men and horses did not deter them, much less these unprepared Rain Bamboo Hall disciples who came under sudden attack.

From the steps at the front of the hall they continued on to the main hall before finally met a martial art master.

‘Ding! Ding! Ding!’

Three clear ringing sounds were heard. Kou Zhong did not even stagger a single

step as he blocked three spears in succession. Letting out a long laugh, he said, "Is it Rain Bamboo Hall's Deputy Hall Master Bao Baiyou?"

The incoming person had not replied, he was already kicked by Kou Zhong on his lower abdomen, and was sent flying backward and fell to the floor; his mouth spurting out fresh blood, and was unable to crawl back up.

Xu Ziling struck with both hands, left and right, continuously sending four Zhuhua Bang disciples of deputy-fragrant-master rank.

"Hold on!"

While Bao Baiyou was being helped up, like a tide a hundred or so men flocked toward the other end of the main hall.

A dozen or so men of all kinds of shapes and sizes appeared from among the crowd toward Kou and Xu, two people.

Just by looking at the insignia on the lapel of their clothes, it was obvious that other than Wind Bamboo Hall, the other Clear Bamboo Hall, Rain Bamboo Hall and Dew Bamboo Hall's Hall Masters and their deputies were gathered here.

Clear Bamboo Hall's Hall Master Zuo Qiubi was the easiest to recognize; compared to average person, he was short and small, but very thick and solid like an ox. His eyebrows arched, his face sunken, and his shoulders were disproportionately very wide, so that he looked like a shrinking giant.

This moment his eyes were flashing with murderous intent; striding one step forward, he pointed his halberd and angrily shouted, "Who are you? You dare to display shockingly bad behavior in our Zhuhua Bang territory?"

Coming face to face with these numerous Zhuhua Bang's martial art masters, Kou Zhong stayed calm without any sign of fear; he laughed aloud and said, "Colluding with outsiders, traitors who attempt in vain to ruin our Gang's foundation, you are not qualified to talk to Yangzhou's loyal martyr Yan Kuan's disciples."

Even though they were confronting this kind of swords-drawn-and-bows-bent situation, where life or death could easily be determined, Xu Ziling was greatly amused and had to struggle hard to keep himself from roaring in laughter. One of Kou Zhong's strong points was that he was able to express any absurd thing in a bold and full of confidence, even lofty, manner.

Rain Bamboo Hall's Hall Master Luo Xian roared, "I don't care who you are, today the two of you came in alive but will leave lifeless."

A saber flashed, a slim man charged at an oblique angle, drawing a cluster of saber flowers, swiftly attacking Kou Zhong from the left side.

Without even looking Kou Zhong casually swept his saber. 'Dang!' The attacking saber, along with the wielder, was jolted that the man staggered back and fell into the crowd.

The hall suddenly fell silent.

Kou Zhong returned his saber into its sheathe; his expression and bearing were not to be outdone by Ba Fenghan when burst into Wang Tong's Mansion the other day.

Dew Bamboo Hall's Hall Master Tong Changfeng let out a cold snort and said, "So you do have a little bit of asset; report your names to this Tangzhu first!"

Turned out the one launching a sneak attack just now was the Deputy Hall Master of the Dew Bamboo Hall, Yan He, whose skill level, as well as the depth of his power, was known very well by Tong Changfeng. He saw how Kou Zhong was able to push Yan He with ease, which he knew he would not be able to do, he became somewhat more polite.

Kou Zhong threw his head back and laughed aloud, "Walking, I have never changed my surname, sitting, I have never changed my given name. Kou Zhong is my name, and he is Xu Ziling; have you heard it clearly?"

Zuo Qiubi and the others looked at each other in dismay; no one did not have his countenance changed.

It should be noted that for the last few years, due to the 'Duke Yang's Treasure Trove' affair, coupled with the fact that even Du Fuwei, Yuwen Clan, Dugu Clan, Li Mi, and the others were helpless to capture them, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's reputation soared; in fact, for the time being it was second to none.

During the battle at the coastal region recently, they managed to inflict serious damage to the coalition force of Shen Faxing and Haisha Bang; this news has spread far and wide all over the world, and has propelled their prestige to top ranking martial art master's position.

Therefore, when they found out that these two were Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, everybody was overwhelmed with emotion.

Zuo Qiubi was a Jianghu veteran, he spoke solemnly, "Rising young heroes, our Gang has always had deep respect toward two gentlemen; why did you come to bully us today?"

Xu Ziling took a step forward and said coldly, "We are indeed loyal martyr Yan Kuan's disciples, Gui Xiangzhu can bear witness for us in this matter; therefore, we are definitely entitled to care about Zhuhua Bang's affair, and we simply cannot not care about it."

Kou Zhong heroically and loftily said, "Where is Tieqi Hui's Ren Shaoming? If he is sensible, he would have come out immediately, to let us cut his head off to be sacrificial offering to the late Bangzhu. If you still harbor any desire to betray our Gang, today you may forget about leaving this place alive."

Zuo Qiubi's countenance changed. "You went too far!" he said, "Charge!"

Everybody drew his weapon.

Xu Ziling sighed inwardly, knowing that Kou Zhong had made up his mind to support Gui Xiliang for the Gang Leader position, so that through him he could

exercise control over Zhuhua Bang, and thus expand his own power. For that reason he forced the other side to fight, to inflict heavy blow to the collusion forces with Ren Shaoming.

Kou Zhong suddenly withdrew toward Xu Ziling, and rapidly said in low voice, "After each of us kill a Tangzhu, we must slip away immediately. If we fail, we must escape even more. Just listen to my signal."

At a moment like this, did Xu Ziling have a choice? He simply nodded.

Two spears, three swords and one saber attacked the two boys from different angles.

Kou Zhong roared, his body swayed, and somehow he has already entered the Clear Bamboo Hall crowd led by Zuo Qiubi; the saber in his hand whirled around, immediately two opponent sabers fell down.

Xu Ziling soared into the air, his target was the top of Rain Bamboo Hall's Hall Master Luo Xian's head. Both his palms pressed down, an enormous qi forced the people around Luo Xian to scatter around, leaving Luo Xian alone to face the attacker.

No matter how formidable Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were, they did not have the capability to kill the more than a hundred Zhuhua Bang martial art masters. Furthermore, if this hard fighting continued, they would fall into the disadvantageous position of the few against the multitude. Therefore, the two boys made up their minds to use the ten-thousand jun [unit of weight, 1 jun = 30 catties] thunderbolt force, while they were still in their peak condition, for each of them to kill one Hall Master. And then the remaining Hall Master would find it hard to clap with one hand, and it would be foolish not to run away immediately.

In the meantime, Kou Zhong already arrived in front of Zuo Qiubi; he sent out ten chops in rapid succession, and all of a sudden Zuo Qiubi realized that everybody around him was hacked down all around and just happened to block the other Gang members from coming up to help him.

'Bang!'

Four palms, belonging to Xu Ziling and Luo Xian, who did not even have time to use his sword, collided. Luo Xian's arms flexed slightly; as if in the power department he was a notch below Xu Ziling, while the fact was that they both shared the limelight. It was simply because Xu Ziling was high in the air pressing down, so he gained a lot of advantage.

Luo Xian was secretly delighted, thinking that Xu Ziling's skill was only so-so. He estimated that if he could block Xu Ziling for a moment, then he would not have to worry because the other people would catch up and chop him into mincemeat.

Right this moment, tens of thousands streams of burning hot qi suddenly entered through his palms, penetrated his own true qi, no-hole-did-not-get-entered like the hot qi invaded his arteries and veins.

While Luo Xian felt his soul flew away and scattered, the pressure on his palms disappeared without any trace; however, an excruciating pain emerged in the pit of his stomach, and his ears heard the sound of disintegrating bones.

His last perception was that Xu Ziling's left and right knees struck his chest in quick succession.

Zuo Qiubi's martial art skill was superior to Luo Xian; he drew a couple of short copper stick and parried Kou Zhong's three saber strikes.

'Dang! Dang! Dang!'

Zuo Qiubi yelled angrily, the pair of sticks shot out at the chest level straight toward the pit of Kou Zhong's stomach. Who would have thought that as he was clearly going to hit the enemy, he suddenly found out that he was hitting empty air?

Saber wind was cutting down from behind.

Zuo Qiubi turned around to parry. To his shock, behind him was also an empty

air, not even the enemy's shadow.

“Tangzhu, be careful!”

Zuo Qiubi felt stabbing pain on his lower back; a burst of cold qi invaded his body from the blade of the saber. Instantly his body froze, he was unable to move a single step.

From Zuo Qiubi's right waist Kou Zhong pulled his saber out and in one fluid motion swept it across three enemies who attacked fiercely. Letting out a long whistle, he backed off immediately.

‘Bang!’

Xu Ziling was one step ahead of him; he already leaped up toward the ceiling, broke through the roof and fled away. Kou Zhong followed closely behind him; using the same home he also flew up and was gone.

Based on the two boys' martial art skill and strategy, they had just accomplished something that was nearly impossible.

Like a whirlwind Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling rushed toward the big stone bridge in front of the Junshi Mansion. Mai Yunfei and the other disciples on guard shouted in a flurry, telling them to stop.

The two boys did not bother to explain, they simply used their fists and kicks to charged through the barricade, sending them into the river like a gale sweeping dead leaves, battered and exhausted.

Only Mai Yunfei seemed to be able to give a token resistance; he managed to block Kou Zhong's two moves before being kicked by Xu Ziling, who has been waiting impatiently on the side, and was also sent to the river.

[1] Chapter title: orig. to feel in one's pocket and take something out.

As the two boys were charging into the main hall like a hot knife through butter, Junshi Shao Lingzhou, Wind Bamboo Hall's Hall Master and his deputy Shen Beichang and Luo Feng, and Song Yuzhi and her team, who were having a meeting in there, were stunned to see them.

Shao Lingzhou was slim, very tall, and on his delicate and handsome face there were five strands of long beard. His age was around forty, his overall appearance reminded them of a religious scholar or even a Taoist immortal.

When he saw the two boys charging in, his eyes flickered with cold rays as he shouted coldly, "Which mad disciples have the impertinence to disturb my Mansion?"

On the north end of the main hall two rows of imperial tutor chairs were arranged, Song Yuzhi occupied the seat of honor on the east, displaying how much respect Zhuhua Bang was showing to the representatives of the Song Clan. Next to her were three men who appeared to be her martial art masters.

Sitting on the west's seat of honor was surprisingly the 'thousand-loveable, a hundred-charm' gorgeous woman, the famous courtesan who, back in Yangzhou, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling loved to peek from a distance, the most popular lady of Tianxian Lou, Miss Yu Ling.

Zhuhua Bang's former Gang Leader Yin Kaizhan was executed by Yang Guang precisely because he refused to present her to him.

It was only at this point the two boys understood the reason Yin Haishan was braving death by having her sent away from Yangzhou was because Yu Ling has become Madame Yin Kaishan.

Sitting under Yu Ling were, in order, Shao Lingzhou, Shen Beichang and Luo Feng. Standing behind the imperial tutor chairs were a dozen or so Zhuhua Bang and the Song Clan's people whose rank was rather low.

Standing behind Yu Ling were precisely Gui Xiliang and Xing Rong, two kids, who, as with eyes open wide they stared at Kou and Xu, two childhood friends of

theirs, were at a loss on how to defend them.

Song Yuzhi was the first to speak up, “Shao Junshi, please calm down. These two must have very strong reason, please let them come in and speak up!”

Shal Lingzhou immediately shouted his order, “Let them in!”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling strode a few steps forward. The former laughed aloud and said, “We are here to propose a business deal. Based on the fact that we, two brothers, have just killed Zuo Qiubi and Luo Xian, perhaps we ought to have the qualifications to speak!”

When they heard this, other than Song Yuzhi, the others were completely taken by surprise.

Wind Bamboo Hall’s Hall Master Shen Beichang said in heavy voice, “Even Laofu has eyes but failed to see; who are you two?”

A gentle and soft, and very pleasant to hear, voice rang from Yu Ling’s fragrant lips, “These two are called Xiao Zhong and Xiao Ling; they have grown so tall that Qie [I, your servant (deprecatory self-reference for women)] nearly did not recognize them.”

After a short pause, she went on, “In the past they were the little bandits under Yangzhou’s loyal martyr Yan Kuan; they loved to steal a peek on Qie. One time they were caught Qie’s men, but seeing their extraordinary character, Qie decided to have my men let them go.”

Seeing Yu Ling still recognized them, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt both honored and greatly embarrassed at the same time, because what they did was not the most honorable thing.

Luo Xian was relieved, “So be it!” he said, “At least you did not really tell us lies.”

With a wry smile Kou Zhong said to Yu Ling, “Yu Ling Jie, do you have to go into

such detail about our past?”

Yu Ling covered her mouth as she laughed coquettishly and said, “And you are still as shameless as before.”

This exchanged immediately eased up the tense atmosphere.

Knitting his brows, Shao Lingzhou said, “Since you are one of our own, plus you have trained quite a good martial art skill, we would be more than happy to receive you; why did you have to fight and force your way in?”

Xu Ziling cupped his fist and said, “Gui Xiangzhu has indeed led us to pay our respect to Shao Junshi, but we were stopped by Mai Xiangzhu outside the bridge. Right now the situation is urgent, we simply had to force our way in, would Shao Junshi please forgive us.”

His refined and gentle bearing immediately earned Shao Lingzhou’s favorable impression. Nodding in approval, he called, “Xiliang! Is that true?”

“It is indeed true,” Gui Xiliang hastily replied.

Kou Zhong interjected, “If Shao Junshi immediately dispatches the elite troops of our Gang, we should have enough time to intercept the renegades led by Dew Bamboo Hall’s Tong Changfeng, and annihilate them in one move, and thus avert our Gang from being split up in pieces.”

Shao Lingzhou, Shen Beichang, Luo Feng, and the others were visibly shaken; they were obviously quite tempted by Kou Zhong’s proposal.

Song Yuzhi and her uncle, his father’s cousin, Song Shuang, who was sitting next to her, exchanged a glance; they knew Kou Zhong’s courageous and ruthless style of cutting weeds and eliminating the roots.

Just by utilizing a simple strategy, the entire situation, as well as the initiative and powers, immediately fell into Kou Zhong’s hands. Therefore, it was clear that he was the kind of personality who could ‘create clouds by turning his palm up,

create rain by turning his palm down’.

A Duozhu [helmsman], Ye Bingchen, standing behind Shao Lingzhou expressed his opinion, “This is a very important matter, how do we know that the two of you are not spies sent by the enemy to lure us into a trap?”

After glowering at Kou Zhong, Song Yuzhi said, “Although this person loves to babble nonsense, he is not the kind of person who loves to tell lies; even more, he is not the kind of person who could be easily bought by the enemy. Am I right, Kou Zhong, Hero Kou?”

Everybody was shocked; it was only now that they realized that the Xiao Zhong, Xiao Ling in front of them were actually the Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, whose names shook the Jianghu, on whose heads laid two separate hunt and kill orders, namely the ‘Duke of Pushan’s Decree’ and the ‘Dong Ming Dispatch’.

Gui Xiliang and Xing Rong’s shock was, quite naturally, no need to be mentioned.

Shen Beichang stood up abruptly; he said gruffly, “Mere Tong Changfeng, he is not worthy in Laofu’s eyes. Leave this matter to Laofu!”

From his bosom Shao Lingzhou took out the ‘Zhuhua Ling’ [Bamboo Flower Plaque, symbol of authority] and whisked it toward Shen Beichang, who, upon receiving it, immediately took his men out.

Song Yuzhi also made a hand signal, immediately two Song Clan martial art masters under Song Shuang’s command also left in a hurry.

The main hall fell silent.

Kou Zhong chuckled softly and said, “Many thanks Miss Song for vouching for me; is it possible for me to have a private chat with Miss?”

Song Yuzhi spoke in disdain, “There is nothing that can’t be said in front of others. Whatever it is, you may speak up here.”

Song Shuang was surprised inwardly, recalling that although this beautiful niece of him was rather strong-willed, it was very seldom that she butted head with other people with equal harshness. Moreover, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's names were among the Song Clan's list of people whom they ought to try to win over. Therefore, determined to help to smooth things over, he said, "I am Song Shuang. Why don't Kou and Xu, two Xiongdi, come over here and sit down first so we can talk it over?"

Shao Lingzhou also immediately ordered his disciples to serve tea; his manner was very polite.

Putting on an angry expression, with a forced laugh Kou Zhong said, "Since Miss Song refuses to do me the honor, is it possible for Xiaodi to have a private chat with Junshi?"

Shao Lingzhou was put on the spot; he looked awkwardly at Song Yuzhi, this beautiful representative of the Song Clan, his big supporter.

Song Yuzhi could not help glowering at this lofty, wild and free-spirited young man. "Why so sneaky anyway?" she said crossly, "If it is concerning Zhuhua Bang's affair, naturally we should discuss it together."

Xu Ziling spoke up nonchalantly, "Since we cannot discuss it with you, we, two brothers, will leave immediately. Only we would appreciate it very much if Shao Junshi could bestow four mule carts for our use."

Realizing the deadlock, Song Shuang signaled Song Yuzhi with his eyes as he stood up and said, "Let us talk about it nicely. Kou Xiongdi, would you be willing to reveal a little bit of what you want to discuss, so that Yuzhi may consider whether she ought to talk to you privately?"

As if nothing had happened, Kou Zhong said, "It's nothing. I was mistaken to think that Miss is still interested in the 'Duke Yang Treasure'; who would have thought that there is no such thing? I really don't have anything good to talk about!"

Everybody in the hall was emotionally moved.

Seething with rage, Song Yuzhi stood up and walked over toward the inner chamber. “Get your @\$ in here!” she said coldly.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud; he winked at Xu Ziling first before running after her.

A strange feeling rose up in everybody’s heart; they all had a vague feeling that Song Yuzhi was unusually blunt toward Kou Zhong. Could it be that it was because she had viewed him in a new light?

Book 7 Chapter 6 – Passionately Selecting Precious Woman

Song Yuzhi took Kou Zhong through the corridor connecting the main hall with the rear pavilion, and then slanting to the left into the west hall, before she was heading toward one of a row of rosewood chairs in the middle of the hall to sit down.

Kou Zhong hurriedly preceded her to pull the chair out a little from the round table and pretending to be respectful he solemnly said, “Song Da Xiaojie, please sit down!”

Song Yuzhi glowered at him angrily. She sat down, and said with a tight face, “Speak up!”

With his left hand grabbing the arm of his chair and his right hand holding on to the back of the chair, Kou Zhong leaned over and put his mouth close to Song Yuzhi’s jade-like sparkling and translucent, emitting whiffs of fragrance, small ear, and sighed in admiration, “Smells really good!” He also made a show of sniffing around and putting an act of a playboy.

Song Yuzhi struggled hard to maintain her wooden expression. Knitting her jet-black eyebrows, she said, “Would you mind moving a bit far way?”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud. Suddenly he straightened up his tiger body, walked around the table, and sat down pompously. His eyes flickered with mysterious flashes as he stared deeply into Song Yuzhi’s beautiful bright eyes. Just as suddenly he sighed and said, “Looks really good!”

Displeased, Song Yuzhi said, “What nonsense are you babbling about?”

Kou Zhong showed a brilliant smile, revealing a row of shining white teeth, and then he seriously said, “The number of women who are worthy to earn my, Kou Zhong’s praise is really not many, and Miss Song is definitely at the top of the list. Just now Xiaodi was enjoying Miss Song’s graceful figure and your touching dainty steps from the back, already my heart and soul were intoxicated, and I am sure that I will never forget it as long as I live.”

Song Yuzhi was wondering in her heart why she did not stop this kid from speaking such frivolous words, even more so, why didn’t she feel the slightest bit of anger? While averting his burning hot gaze, which was able to penetrate her heart, she lowered her head and said, “If you continue speaking that kind of frivolous thing, I won’t speak with you.”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Men and women pleasing each other is the great unifying factor in human relationship. As long as we are sincere and in a good faith, how could you call it frivolous?”

Song Yuzhi sighed and finally met his eyes. Shaking her head, she said, “Kou Zhong, if you are thinking of playing a trick on me, Song Yuzhi, it will be useless. First of all, I will never be fond of you. Second, I always think that you are the kind of person who loves to speak flowery words to coax us, womenfolk. Third ...”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, “Isn’t it true that your Die has already given your hands in marriage, that you already have a future husband?”

Song Yuzhi’s tender body trembled slightly; hanging down her tiny head, she nodded and said, “It’s good that you can guess that!”

Kou Zhong mused how could he not guess? Such a high-class family and powerful clan like the Song Clan, especially the Clan Leader ‘Heavenly Saber’ Song Que’s beloved daughter, her marriage option was naturally strictly limited to families that were well matched in terms of social status. Men could take concubines based on personal preferences, but women did not have this kind of

liberty; they could only depend on their family to make the arrangement, to be matched with appointed men.

Kou Zhong shrugged his shoulders with confidence and at ease as he said nonchalantly, "Difference in social status is one thing, how much Miss dislikes me is another thing. But for me, whatever I feel in my heart, I will only feel comfortable if I speak it up."

Heaving a deep sigh, he turned his gaze to the window, toward the garden outside the pavilion resplendent under the brilliant sunshine. Shaking his head with a wry smile, he said, "Ever since that day in Xingyang city, at the small alley outside Shen Luoyan's residence wrestling with Miss and hugging and having close personal contact, I ..."

Greatly embarrassed, Song Yuzhi cut him off, "I forbid you to mention that matter, from now on you must not mention it to any other people, especially Xu Ziling."

Kou Zhong broke into giggle, "Forgive me," he said, "I already could not bear not to tell him. If I kept it bottled inside of me, I would burst to die, ha ha!"

Song Yuzhi was greatly angered, "You, this kid, will never be serious. It is clear to me that you are teasing me again. What I hate the most is people like you."

Kou Zhong spread out his hands, "Miss, calm down!" he said, "After all, I, Kou Zhong, have a little bit of self-realization. I clearly know that Miss can't possibly look up to a man with a humble origin like myself. Right now Miss is willing to listen to me unloading what's in my mind, Kou Zhong's appreciation is indeed not shallow. From now on I will not mention that matter!"

Song Yuzhi shook her head in distress and cast him a hateful stare. She hated him for being frivolous, but she was also afraid that from now on he would be heartless. The contradiction in her heart was really distressing.

Ever since she was little, her dream mate was a man of noble birth, erudite and multi-talented, cultured and refined, charming and handsome.

The one in front of her was wild from head to toes, a playboy loved to seduce women of good family. Hence, he should be a man she loathed the most. Yet he had created in her an unprecedented stimulation, and deep down in her heart she was wishing that he would continue talking to her like that.

It was not to say that she had fallen in love with him, rather, that kind of stimulation had made her forget the load of her mind and made her wish to continue listening to his bullshit.

Kou Zhong sprawled himself comfortably in the chair, after stretching out, he said in gentle voice, "After we part this time, I don't know whether there will be a day we will meet again, but I know that for the rest of my life, I will never forget Yuzhi's demeanor when you are happy and when you are angry."

Slightly cross, Song Yuzhi said, "I forbid you to call my name, you and I don't have that kind of relationship yet."

With a hint of smile on his face, Kou Zhong looked at her straight in the eye and said, "Very well! I respect Miss Song's view. Let us talk about Zhuhua Bang's affair now!"

Song Yuzhi fought hard to suppress the disappointment that arose suddenly in her heart; she said with a wooden face, "You'd better not get involved in my Song family and Zhuhua Bang's affair. My Song family won't make any business deal with you even more."

Kou Zhong straightened up his body; without the slightest care in the world he smiled and said, "Then there is no point in any negotiation. Whether in the future your Song family and I will become friends or foes, let Laotianye decides."

Turning around, he was about to walk away when Song Yuzhi suddenly stood up and shouted with her tender voice, "Kou Zhong, don't you dare walking away from me!"

Kou Zhong leisurely walked around to Song Yuzhi's back, put his face close to her brimming-with-energy beautiful face, breathing his warm breath next to her completely-without-blemish skin, and said softly, "Miss Song, what instruction

are you going to bestow to me?"

Song Yuzhi's breathing quickened; her breasts were heaving up and down in an unprecedented rate. Suddenly she turned around and fast as lightning her jade palm pressed on Kou Zhong's broad chest, and she said with hatred, "I want to kill you!"

Kou Zhong opened up both arms and with smile across his whole face he said, "Be my guest!"

Song Yuzhi's pretty face alternated between light and dark, at first the beautiful pupil of her eyes was suffused with profound murderous aura, but just as sudden the murderous aura was replaced by a complex emotion.

From her jade palm she could feel Kou Zhong's heartbeat, and every single beat brought her unparalleled shock.

In a flash she recovered her cold demeanor. Sending out a burst of force she pushed Kou Zhong away that he staggered three steps back, and then she said emotionlessly, "What do you have in mind?"

A deep, unfathomable smile appeared on Kou Zhong's face; turning around, he walked over toward a large window. Standing proudly like a mountain, he looked outside the window, put his hands behind his back and said, "When the world is in chaos, heroes appear. Take your Song family for example, before your ancestors established the Song Clan, weren't they the same as Kou Zhong, people who don't have anything at all? In time of rapid changes like this, anybody could become a duke, marquis, general or prime minister, even an emperor who unifies the world [tian xia]."

Song Yuzhi detected the heroic, proud and strong aura in the tone of Kou Zhong's voice; momentarily she was stunned speechless.

Kou Zhong took a deep breath and said, "Supposing I killed the 'Green Dragon' [see Book 7 Chapter 3] Ren Shaoming, how would Miss repay me?"

Song Yuzhi was speechless for half a day. She left her seat and walked over until she was about five chi from his back. Shaking her head, she said with a sigh, "You are either excessively overestimating yourself, or you are underestimating Ren Shaoming too much. Do you think Ren Shaoming is of the same level as Zuo Qiubi, Luo Xian, and the others? In Jiangnan, Ren Shaoming and Lin Shihong are equally famous. Other than my Die, nobody dares to think that he is better than him. Not to mention Tieqi Hui's men are strong their horses robust. Merely his subordinates, Evil Monk and Amorous Nun, two great martial art masters, who both are in charge of their two factions, I am afraid the two of you will have trouble to deal with."

After smiling wryly, she added, "Much less presently everybody in Jianghu wants to capture you; the two of you are in an extremely difficult situation. Will you have time to mind other people's business?"

Letting out a cold humph, Kou Zhong said, "Future fact will authenticate what I, Kou Zhong, say today. Right now I just want to ask Miss Song: supposing I can kill the thorn in your Song family's side, will you, Song Clan, be willing to support Gui Xiliang, the beloved disciple of the late Bangzhu, to inherit the Bangzhu position?"

Staring blankly at him, Song Yuzhi said, "You have such a grand ambition."

"Without ambition, how can you accomplish great things?" Kou Zhong loftily said, "As long as Miss Song provides intelligence on that Ren Shaoming's movements, I, Kou Zhong can guarantee that his little life will be difficult to protect."

Against her will Song Yuzhi took two steps forward to his left side; after scrutinizing his silhouette, which was brimming with masculine charisma, she said in heavy voice, "If you knew that we have sent three different teams to assassinate Ren Shaoming, all three times we suffered the misfortune of having our entire troops failed miserably, would you even consider another near-suicide plan like that?"

Like a twister Kou Zhong spun around so that he came face to face with Song Yuzhi, who was only about a cun shorter than he was, and the distance between them was less than three cun. His tiger eyes shone with a very strong confidence

while his voice was full of fighting spirit, “Those who can achieve extraordinary great undertaking must achieve extraordinary matters first. What we, two brothers, lack right now is a great battle which will cause sensation in Wulin. This deficiency will be rectified by Ren Shaoming first. Even if you are unwilling to make a deal, this matter is still absolutely necessary. Besides, even if we do not make any move, do you think Ren Shaoming will still let us off?”

Song Yuzhi’s blank expression immediately disappeared, her beautiful eyes were glistening as she locked gaze with Kou Zhong’s eyes. She said in heavy tone, “Although we have considerable influence toward the Zhuhua Bang, we may not necessarily be able to influence the candidates of Bangzhu election.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Kou Zhong said, “If Zhuhua Bang loses the Song Clan’s support today, it will collapse tomorrow. If I killed Ren Shaoming, you guys will support Gui Xiliang to be the Gang Leader. The first order of business is to delay the General Assembly of the Bamboo Forest. In this short period of time, I will rely on you to do your magic.”

Song Yuzhi said in distress, “You are too overbearing and love to force others to do your bidding.”

After looking deep into her eyes for a moment, Kou Zhong said, “I am leaving now. Miss Song, please think about it! Anytime Miss Song sends us intelligence about Ren Shaoming, we’ll carry out the transaction.”

Song Yuzhi recovered her calm-demeanor completely; not letting the proximity between them, so close that they could smell each other’s breath, bothered her, she looked back into his eyes and said, “Don’t you still have the ‘Duke Yang’s Treasure’ thing to tell me about?”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, “Please tell your esteemed father, if he is willing to give his beloved daughter in marriage to me, Kou Zhong, the ‘Duke Yang’s Treasure’ will be my, Kou Zhong’s betrothal gift to offer to him. If your esteemed father could accept Gui Xiliang as his disciple, that will be even more ideal. Yuzhi ought to understand my meaning!”

With a loud laughter he simply walked away, leaving Song Yuzhi whose thought

was in a whirl.

Four mule carts were tied together. Driving the cart at the head of the train were Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling. Gui Xiliang and Xing Rong urged their horses to send them off out of the city.

The city defense was strengthened substantially, the Zhuhua Bang men joined hands with the citizens of the city, working hard together to set up fortifications.

Kou Zhong turned toward Gui Xiliang and said with a laugh, “Kid, you need to work a bit harder, and then your brother, me, will help you to attain the Bangzhu position.”

Gui Xiliang was greatly shocked, “What nonsense are you talking about?” he said.

“Nonsense?” Kou Zhong sneered, “This is more real than a piece of pearl. With me and Xiao Ling supporting you, plus the Song Clan behind you, your chance of becoming the Bangzhu is greater than anybody else’s.”

Xing Rong, who was riding on the other side, was so shocked that his face turned green and his lips paled, “Are you going to kill us? How could Shao Junshi let Xiliang become the Bangzhu?” he asked.

Xu Ziling remained silent, but from his expression, it was clear that he resented Kou Zhong’s remark.

Kou Zhong calmly said, “We are all brothers, how could I harm you? The fact will prove everything. Go back now!”

Lashing the whip down, he drove the mule train faster passing through the city gate and into the dusty road outside.

Kou Zhong cast a glance toward Xu Ziling. He sighed and said, “Xiao Ling, just consider it I am asking for your help, all right? Don’t give me that kind of look, you made my heart feel so uneasy.”

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "What did you talk about with Song Yuzhi? You made us waiting anxiously for more than half a sichen."

"Naturally talking about the conditions of our business deal," Kou Zhong nonchalantly replied, "But in passing I was also teasing her, to see whether she would refuse or welcome my advance with her alluring seductive appearance. Don't you think she is alluring?"

Xu Ziling let out a subdued snort and said, "I don't care how alluring she is, it's no use. Because what you are looking for is not her as a person, but her Song family's tremendous power. If you obtain the Song Clan's support, you would obtain power over half of the south. Now I am convinced that in order for you to win over the world, you will do anything, by hook or by crook."

Kou Zhong said exasperatedly, "Xiao Ling, not again! To tell you the truth, I really have adoring thought toward her. But I realized it's just a delusion. Because she has been betrothed early on. Ay! Right now my great undertaking is just getting started, your support is very critical for me. Besides, don't you forget that if we do not expand our power, sooner or later we will be slaughtered by either your precious Princess or Li Mi."

Xu Ziling's heart softened. He heaved a sigh, and no longer said anything.

By the time the sun set over the western hills, the jungle where Duan Yucheng and the others, along with their salt, were hidden appeared on the horizon.

The surging water of the Yangtze River outside the jungle looked spectacular under the glow of the setting sun.

Kou Zhong let out the secret signal. But after waiting for half a day, they still did not see Duan Yucheng and the others coming out of their hiding to meet them.

The two boys exchanged glances, both felt something was not right.

They jumped down the cart, untied the mules from the carts, and let them rest and eat some grass. And then side by side they walked down the hillside toward the jungle.

Kou Zhong said in a low voice, "If something is wrong, we'll flee toward the river and regroup. Do you think it could be Ren Shaoming's men?"

"I don't know!" Xu Ziling replied.

Fully alert, the two boys entered the jungle. They crept toward the place where they hid the salt, while sending their qi toward their feet and eyes, to see whether there were any traps around.

When they reached the clearing in front of the place where they hid their salt, the two boys could only stare blankly with mouth agape. Because they saw Duan Yucheng and the others, four men, were tied with their arms behind their back and the rope looped around their necks. Even their mouths were stuffed that they could not speak. And they were placed on top of the salt sacks that were piled up into a small hill.

A cold snort came from behind them.

The two boys turned around in shock, only to see Fu Junyu standing enchantingly behind the two boys. Her face was as cold as ice and snow while her pretty eyes shot incomparable hatred toward them.

A warning signal went off in their hearts.

The two boys turned their eyes toward the pile of salt again, and saw a handsome, dignified Ba Fenghan, whose entire being exuded some kind of cold blade aura, was sitting leisurely at the edge of the salt hill, and was looking at them up and down, with a hint of smile at the corner of his mouth.

The two boys' scalp went numb, while in their heart they groaned incessantly.

Any one of these two adversaries would give the two boys a very hard time to

deal with, and now both of them were here and worse yet, they seemed to work together.

Acting as if he was ready to destroy them, Ba Fenghan calmly and leisurely said, “Kou Xiong, Xu Xiong are now renowned figures. Early on Zaixia [lit. under, myself (humble)] had a mind to make friends with you. It’s a pity that you have provoked Junyu, so that even Zaixia is in an extremely difficult position.”

After a short pause, he went on, “If you are willing to fight one-on-one with Junyu, life or death will depend on your real skill, Zaixia can promise not to interfere. I wonder what the two brothers think?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Xiling exchanged some glances. Suddenly they roared in laughter together.

Their laughter was filled with strong fighting spirit.

Book 7 Chapter 7 – Mortal Danger, Escape Alive

Kou Zhong thundered, “Xiao Ling, you go pay your respect to Yu Yi [aunt], leave it to me to accompany Ba Xiong playing several moves!”

Fu Junyu let out a cold humph and said, “This fellow does not know the immensity of heaven and earth. Based on those several tricks of yours, what gives you the qualification to challenge Fenghan? And don’t call me Yu Yi anymore. I have no relationship whatsoever with you.”

Ba Fenghan burst out laughing and said, “Although you, these two kids, are quite all right, your level is not enough to play with Ol’ Ba. Just show your real skill nicely, see if you are qualified to have relationship with Junyu! If I made my move, I will not hold my hands at all.”

While talking, both his facial expression and his demeanor carried the poise of a man from an influential family, perfectly matching his heroic and grand countenance, which made other people admiring him from the heart. No wonder Fu Junyu was conquered by him.

Xu Ziling smiled faintly and said, “Ba Xiong is too conceited. I am afraid that when you are too full of yourself, when suffering defeat, it would be even harder for you to get off the stage.”

It was Fu Junyu who scrambled to take the initiative on Ba Fenghan’s behalf; with her tender voice she scolded, “No need to spout nonsense! Who’s going to go first?”

Ba Fenghan did not take offence at all; he simply sized the two boys up coldly, but in his heart he started to get a peculiar feeling that he had never felt before.

Since making great accomplishment in martial art at the age of eighteen, these past seven years he made it his special purpose in life to fight in one place after another all over the world, to temper himself through real combat experience, so that his spirit, qi and mind were rising into an unprecedented heights. It could even be said that his vigor was simply uncontested.

Upon arriving in the Central Plains, the number of martial art masters from famous schools who fell under his hand was at least forty, fifty people. However, he had never encountered anybody who could talk and laugh as though nothing had happened like Kou and Xu, two people. Apparently these two boys did not think of him as a big deal.

Simply this kind of cool-headed skill was enough to make him to have a whole new level of respect for them. Not to mention Kou Zhong's innate overbearing character and Xu Ziling's calm, confident and cool character, which were rarely seen, were enough to make his heart itched. Too bad he already promised Fu Junyu that he would refrain himself and was going to sit on the sideline as a spectator; otherwise, he would have charged forward to try it himself.

The official reason of his trip to the Central Earth this time was to flee from Bi Xuan, but the unspoken reason was actually to actively resisting Bi Xuan. Compared to Bi Xuan, he had to admit that he was still several notches inferior; therefore, he headed east to gain real combat experience before he would attempt to have a decisive battle against Bi Xuan again. And now that he saw a good test object, how could his heart not itch to try?

Meanwhile Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "Yu Yi, please keep calm, don't get excited! If you want to fight then fight!"

'Qiang!' The Moon in the Well left its scabbard, and immediately turned into a rainbow, shooting toward Ba Fenghan, who was sitting on the pile of salt sacks.

Almost simultaneously Xu Ziling soared into the air, like a turning wheel his two

fists attacked Ba Fenghan's face.

This move was totally beyond Ba Fenghan and Fu Junyu's expectation; they had never imagined that the two boys would be so dauntless. Unexpectedly they had the impertinence to make their move against the most overbearing Ba Fenghan first.

Ba Fenghan let out a cold snort. Nobody saw which move he was using, but his body suddenly flew upwards swiftly. His left hand drew the saber, his right hand pulled the sword, which exploded into two blade bursts, separately meeting the two boys' attacks.

The two boys made a sound like a muffled thunder as the three figures swiftly met and just as swiftly separated.

Even with Ba Fenghan's ability, due to the fact that he did not anticipate encountering two streams of qi, one cold and one hot, from the 'Secret to Long Life', especially because Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling knew how formidable he was and thus they went all-out in this first attack, he could not help suffering a hidden loss. As his body flew backwards over the salt sacks, he made an effort to land behind the pile, and seized that opportunity to neutralize the true qi invading his body.

Actually, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's condition was even worse.

The strength of the earthshaking reaction force from Ba Fenghan's saber and sword was definitely could not be anticipated in advance. Like a sharp blade it penetrated the two boys' body, so that they immediately suffered severe internal injury.

Although the clash only happened in an instant, there was simple no room for maneuver in this simple, no-fancy moves, head-on clash.

When Kou Zhong's Moon in the Well struck Ba Fenghan's sword, he only felt that the opponent's sword emitted two different streams of power, so that it was difficult for the opponent to pin down. Kou Zhong's entire body received a thunderbolt strike, which jolted him backwards.

When Xu Ziling's fists met the blade of the saber of the most formidable opponent in his life, in the split second just before the fist met the blade, the two combatants' true qi had already clashed heavily against each other. To Xu Ziling's shock, the enemy's powerful qi continued to flow along the sword's edge into his body like hot knife through butter, and he could barely dissolve this qi just before it invaded the arteries and veins around his heart. Immediately his blood and qi surged, he was unable to continue with the follow-up move, and was thrown backwards.

Just before the two boys landed heavily on the ground, like a ghost Fu Junyu floated over with the sword in her hand. The two boys knew that the moment they touched the ground was the critical moment between life and death, hence they swiftly rolled toward each other.

'Bang!'

When the two crashed into each other, Fu Junyu's sword has become sword screen that filled the air, hiding the sky and covering the earth, coming down to trap them.

But it never had any chance to hit the two boys.

Right the moment when the two bodies touched each other, their true qi immediately flowed from one body to the other. Not only it healed each other's internal injury, it also strengthened each other's true qi.

In the whole wide world, perhaps only these two boys were capable of doing this kind of incomparably fantastic healing tactics.

Kou Zhong's Moon in the Well soared into the sky, penetrating Fu Junyu's sword net.

Taking the opportunity while Fu Junyu was impeded by Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling's body shot up from the ground toward the opponent's left side, and send out a palm strike across empty air.

‘Ding!’

Although Fu Junyu has already anticipated that the two boys still had strength to strike back, she did not think that they would be able to strike back at full force. In her shock, even though she managed to block Kou Zhong’s saber attack with ten-thousand jun [1 jun ~ 30 catties] thunderbolt force, she was caught off guard by Xu Ziling’s palm wind.

However, she was a martial art master after all. The instant before the palm wind reached her body, she suddenly changed direction midair and moved sideways. But still, the palm wind swept her and made her let out a stifled grunt, while she was thrown far away.

Ba Fenghan, who was on the other side of the salt pile, was actually more shocked than Fu Junyu, who had suffered injury. Having a superior eyesight, before the two boys even made their move, he had already seen the level of their skill, and was so sure that even they joined hands, they would still be not his match. Who would have thought that even after he was using two different stream of qi to attack the two boys, not only he was unable to injure the two boys, unexpectedly they still had enough strength to strike back with even more bold and powerful force? How could he not be shocked?

By this time he still has not been able to neutralize the two boys’ cold and hot qi completely, yet he knew that the current situation demanded immediate action. Therefore, forcing himself to raise his qi up, he soared high into the air.

The sword returned to its sheathe, the saber moved to his right hand, he swiftly charged toward Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, who had just emerged from the pile of salt.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Ba Xiong, please return!” While speaking, his hand did not hesitate at all, he raised his saber to parry.

Meanwhile Xu Ziling swept toward Duan Yucheng and the others. Left and right he moved lightning fast to pat around on the four men’s body, the ropes binding them disintegrated into cun-long pieces, and their acupoints were unsealed at the same time.

Ba Fenghan, who was still in the air, saw all these and his scalp went numb.

It should be noted that he sealed the four men's acupoints using his unique school's technique; not only it was a high level technique in acupoints-sealing, he also spent considerable time to do that. Yet Xu Ziling was able to break his technique merely by brushing his hands. No wonder he was greatly shocked.

Actually, Xu Ziling did not understand any acupoint-sealing technique, he was simply sending his true qi into their bodies, and simply prompted natural circulation of their own qi through their meridians, and thus spontaneously breaking the unique skill that Ba Fenghan was immensely proud about.

In the meantime Duan Yucheng and the others heard Xu Ziling's order; they hurriedly climbed down the pile of salt and ran away as fast as they could.

By this time continuous ringing was heard as Kou Zhong was blocking three of Ba Fenghan's swift, fierce and unparalleled saber strikes.

Noticing how Kou Zhong was quite straining in taking Ba Fenghan's attack from above and the danger seemed to be growing without restraint, Xu Ziling hastily charged from an angle; his two hands turned into a blur of fists filling the air, violently attacking Ba Fenghan.

After restoring her qi, Fu Junyu also charged forward with the sword in her hand.

Kou and Xu knew their situation was getting worse; if they let Fu Junyu took control of either one of them, the other one would be slaughtered by Ba Fenghan in under ten moves. Therefore, they immediately attacked Ba Fenghan together with everything they had.

Ba Fenghan knew very well that given a bit more time, he would be able to get these two under control; however, his true qi was depleted, plus the two boys' hot and cold, two opposing true qi were very difficult to deal with. Therefore, helplessly he had to fly side ways to evade the attack.

The two boys did not dare to continue fighting; they halted their movements and immediately turned around to escape toward the Great River. Even if Bi Xuan, Ning Daoqi came personally, it would still be difficult for them to catch up with the two boys, who were already more than a dozen zhang away in such a short period of time.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stuck out their heads from among the reefs littering the bank of the river, to see whether Ba Fenghan and Fu Junyu's shadows have entered the darkness in the distant opposite bank downstream from where they were.

Xu Ziling stuck out his tongue and said, "That Fengzhi Han [rheumatism, see Book 4 Chapter 4] is probably more formidable than Old Die or Yuwen Huagu."

Among the people they had encountered thus far, Du Fuwei and Yuwen Huaji were the ones with the highest martial art skill. Therefore, Xu Ziling was saying that among the martial art masters they encountered, Ba Fenghan was the most overpowering one.

With lingering fear, Kou Zhong said, "Have you forgotten Yang Xuyan? At least this time we are not injured. Do you reckon they might come back?"

"If I were them," Xu Ziling replied, "I would find a hilltop where I could wait patiently. The moment we, two big melon heads, came back to retrieve our goods will be the moment we die in our beds at ripe old age!"

Immensely proud of himself, Kou Zhong said, "This is called 'heroes usually agree'. Right now Fengshi Han and Yu Yi must be blowing their little noggin's top in rage because of us; they would not let us off even if they had to die. Ha! If we can lure that pair of wild mandarin ducks [i.e. lovers] in a wild goose chase for several hundred li, won't Xiao Duan [little Duan] and the others have plenty of time to deliver the goods?"

Knitting his brows, Xu Ziling said, "Whether we can outrun Fengshi Han or not, I dare not say. But we definitely cannot outrun Yu Yi; have you thought about it clearly?"

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Playing hide-and-seek is playing hide-and-seek, it is a different thing from competing qinggong with everything we have. Speaking about escaping skill, they are not our, Central Plains' Two Dragons' match."

Xu Ziling's childish heart was greatly aroused, he laughed and said, "Who approved our promotion from Yangzhou's Two Dragons to Central Plains' Two Dragons?"

While playing with the water, Kou Zhong laughed and said, "This is called 'progress'. Right! We should meet Xiao Duan and the others. Where did we say we'll meet?"

Xu Ziling replied, "Since this place is not far from Baling, we might as well go there to look for Su Jie, perhaps she's been looking for us and could not find us."

"Excellent plan!" Kou Zhong cried out, "We'll find those four kids first and then we'll think about it carefully. Come on!"

Finished speaking, the two boys dove into the water again.

The two boys ran swiftly long the river toward a comparatively higher elevation. Crouching on top of a large rock, they concentrated their attention to the lower reaches of the river.

"How come we have not seen anybody?" Kou Zhong wondered, "Could it be that we overestimated them? If we had known this, we might as well come with Xiao Duan and the others to deliver our precious cargo of salt."

Xu Ziling frowned and said, "I have a very ominous feeling. They may have been winding around and wait for us ahead."

Aghast, Kou Zhong abruptly turned his head around, and happened to see from the jungle ahead a flock of birds flew up because something startled them. Nudging Xu Ziling, he said in a low voice, "You are right. Now what should we do?"

Xu Ziling smiled lightly and said, “Now we circulate our breathing properly, preserving and nurturing our spirit, waiting until they cannot take it anymore and come out of their hiding, and then we’ll leave.”

With a wry smile Kou Zhong turned over to lie under the bushes, and then with a sigh of contentment he said, “I wonder how many stars are there in the sky?”

Copying him, Xu Ziling also pushed everything out of his mind as he lay down comfortably next to him. Staring at the magnificent vast night sky full of stars above, he said, “Everything before our eyes are so fantastic. Ever since the heavens and the earth existed, those stars also existed for eternity. Not only have they cycled continuously, but the unlimited changes also contain imperturbable physical law. If our martial art skill can imitate the stars, *i.e.* constancy is concealed inside the changes, will it also exist eternally?”

Kou Zhong was emotionally moved, “This logic is even deeper and more mysterious than the ‘moon in the well’. For the time being, let us call it ‘Star Transformation’. But how do we apply it to martial art?”

This moment Xu Ziling has completely forgotten about Ba Fenghan and Fu Junyu who were persistently hunting them. He said seriously, “Perhaps this is what Niang said about the principle of guarding only one thing. When we are fighting against people, there were thousand thoughts ten thousand considerations on how to achieve victory; there are too many variables, yet we still cannot truly grasp the subtle constant within the ten thousands variables. Therefore, from the beginning we failed to achieve the first-class level.”

Kou Zhong was shaken, “I understand now,” he said, “What you said about guarding only one thing is merely the mental cultivation [xin fa], just like the moon in the water well. In my opinion it is like what Yu Yi said about the Yijian principle [reminder: ‘yi’ here is the ancient name for Chinese chess]. The emptiness is the chessboard, the stars in the sky are the chess piece. Although the chess pieces move with countless permutation, they still have to follow certain immutable law. Therefore, as long as we can grasp this legal principle of obtaining victory, countless permutation will never leave each other, in the end we can still control the enemy to score a victory.”

Xu Ziling sat up and thought hard, “When we play chess, if in every step we can

force the opponent not to have any option to react, we could gain control over the overall situation. But in facing Ba Fenghan, Yang Xuyan, Ol' Die, that kind of martial art masters, we are practically on the receiving end of being forced not to have the ability to deal with it, and were forced to just counter every move; hence none of those changes or constants can be used."

Kou Zhong also sat up straight; scratching his head, he said, "Honestly, the more I think, the more confused I am. But is it possible that the opposite is true, *i.e.* if we can grasp the opponent's constant, it would be as if we know the layout of his chess pieces, won't it be like 'grasp it and the victory is assured'?"

Casting his gaze toward the distant jungle where Ba Fenghan, two people might be hiding, Xu Ziling shook his head and said, "When one is in a battle, he only knew how to defeat the enemy to save his own life; how could he grasp the constant change of the enemy? Unless he is able to transcend the chess movement ..."

Speaking to this point, the two boys were shaken at the same time, and looked at each other's eyes.

Kou Zhong spoke with trembling voice, "His granny's Niang, I know the Yijian principle. First, we must understand the immutable law of the chessboard, just like the other day Yu Yi hacking and chopping randomly, seemingly without any principle, yet she was forcing me to respond constantly, totally powerless to take the initiative to strike back, just because she was one step ahead of me in grasping the several moves I was going to play next. Only if our martial art skill can reach this realm will we be able to feel that our skill has finally attain 'the way'. But her cultivation is still too shallow, only after several moves, she was confused by my changes."

If Fu Junyu knew that the remark she casually blurted has helped these two martial art talents in making an unmatched breakthrough, she would definitely regret it.

Gazing up at the stars above, Xu Ziling muttered to himself, "Yijian Method, Yijian Method!"

Kou Zhong groaned as if he was sighing, “It’s not Star Transformation, but Chess Transformation. No! Star Transformation is a bit better, a bit more mysterious. After this my ‘Moon in the Well’ ought to be called ‘Star Transformation Precious Saber’.”

Xu Ziling shook his head and said, “No! Your saber is still the ‘Moon in the Well’. You can’t have ‘three hearts two intention’ [i.e. wishy washy]. ‘Star Transformation’ is mine.”

“You can’t be serious!” Kou Zhong cried out, “Are you saying that you are going to carve the ‘Star Transformation’, two characters [xing bian] onto your hands? Which one are you going to call ‘Star Transformation’? Your left hand or your right hand? When you fight, are you going to warn your opponent to watch for your ‘Star Transformation’ hand? Ha ...”

While Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were doubling up in laughter, a warning signal suddenly went off in their hearts.

Ba Fenghan and Fu Junyu appeared about twenty zhang away to their left, and were fleeing over like a shooting star toward them.

Book 7 Chapter 8 – Excellent Escape Plan

One after another Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling fled for their lives on the mountain and fields. By this time the two boys had reached the 'body weary, strength exhausted' state; but because powerful enemies were after them, they could only run toward the precipitous mountain trying to escape.

Since three days ago when Ba Fenghan and Fu Junyu caught up with them, they had run for several hundred li from Jiangyin toward Dongji, passing through Yixing and Yongshi, two big county towns.

Although they have given everything they had, with crafty scheme and brilliant plan, all along they were unable to shake off Ba Fenghan and Fu Junyu. It was only then did they realize that either one of Ba or Fu was an expert in tracking and following; they could not help whining on for days.

That evening Ba Fenghan, two people were getting closer and closer, the two boys sensed that they were only about a hundred or so zhang away. Fortunately they came across a rapids in a secluded canyon deep in the mountains, plus the rain was pouring heavily. The two boys followed the rapids downstream for more than ten li before they were able to delay the imminent disaster for a few moments.

By the time the two boys crawled up from the river, not only their strength was gone their muscles weary, their clothes were tattered and they were covered in scars due to the frictions with sharp rocks along the way; in short, they were completely battered and exhausted. Kou Zhong even lost his Moon in the Well.

Under the downpour the two boys climbed over an overhanging cliff, and since

they were unable to take it any longer, both collapsed on the ground.

Gasping for breath, Kou Zhong said, "You think we lost Fengshi Han yet? The rain is so heavy, any scent or trace ought to be washed away!"

Xu Ziling turned his face up, to let the sharp raindrops shot like arrows onto his face. He sighed and said, "No matter how you look at it, it seems to me that this guy is determined to stake it all against us; whoever collapse first is the loser."

Kou Zhong bitter said, "Supposing this time we can escape alive, it would mean that our qinggong has made tremendous progress. Ay! When we left that day, we were so proud and strong, who would have thought that this wicked Ah Yi [maternal aunt] who cannot tell good from evil, plus one Fengshi Han, can make us look like the dog of a mourning family?"

Xu Ziling dropped down with his entire body crouched down on the ground, his handsome face close to the muddy edge of the cliff, he groaned and said, "The Heaven decreed that to be a great man, one must first labor his muscles and bones, temper his will, and deplete his body. In my opinion, before we are out the critical circumstances, we ought to practice for three more days!"

Kou Zhong also craned his neck to look down into the ravine below, he saw a waterfall from the upper left cliff rushing down into a small lake, with dark jungle all around it, which extended continuously in the canyon below until nobody knew how deep or how far.

Leaning out farther away, he saw underneath the cliff about ten zhang away from him was an old pine tree with great number of branches and luxuriant leaves; it was exceptionally spectacular.

Having a brainwave, Kou Zhong called out, "Xiao Ling, come quick and look, like a miracle a big tree unexpectedly grew under the cliff; it must be a place of charm and beauty. We might as well go down to take a look, who knows if there is a cave down there where we can hide for several days, so that even their feet become crippled from walking, that wicked Ah Yi and Fengshi Han cannot find us."

Xu Ziling made an effort to prop himself up and crawl toward the edge of the cliff; but before he had any chance to look down, his body suddenly shook, “Bad!” he said.

Kou Zhong was greatly startled; following Xu Ziling’s gaze, he looked toward the opposite side of the ravine, to a small hill that was perhaps about fifty zhang lower than their cliff. But he did not detect anything unusual. “What is it?” he hastily asked.

This moment the rain was getting heavier, plus the forest was dark, so that not only it was difficult to see into the distance, they also had to raise their voices just to be heard.

Xu Ziling put his lips next to Kou Zhong’s ears and said in a low voice, “They are coming! Just now a sudden gust of wind carried the sound of broken branches into my ears. Heavens! How did they do it?”

Kou Zhong was frightened as well. Under this kind of circumstances, how did the enemy manage to trail them and keep them at their arm’s length?

“Do you still have any strength left?” he asked in heavy voice.

Xu Ziling shook his head with wry smile. “Do you?” he asked back.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “We, two brothers, are the same thing. If you are incapable, naturally I am too. But in my opinion, wicked Ah Yi and Fengshi Han are not much better compared to us. Otherwise they would not have broken a branch. Right now there is only one way out, which is going down to look for a cave. What do you think? Do you want to try?”

Xu Ziling said, “Based on our experience these past few days, no matter where we hide, they always managed to find us. But tonight apparently their hearing is also impeded by this heavy rain, so that for the first time they let us lie down here for nearly half a sichen. If we could exploit this favorable situation, we might be able to escape with our lives.”

Recalling the small lake at the bottom of the waterfall, Kou Zhong had a brainwave, “Right now, even though Ning Daoqi and Fu Cailin have eyes, it’s like they are blind. Supposing ... ha ... I got an idea.”

The two boys standing side by side at the edge of the cliff, each one holding a large rock that they wrapped in their tattered outer robe.

This moment they heard the sound of wind from behind coming nearer and nearer. Kou Zhong signaled Xu Ziling with his eyes, suddenly the two boys let out a shout and throw the large rocks down first before they followed by jumping down.

By the time the two boys have safely landed on the old pine tree below, the rocks were still falling rapidly down. The sound of their robes rustling against the wind continued on, getting farther and farther away; there was really no difference from if they were jumping down.

The two boys did not dare to breathe loudly, they crouched on the pine tree and did not dare to budge.

‘Splash! Splash!’ The sound of objects falling into the water was faintly heard from about a hundred zhang below.

Fu Junyu’s voice followed from above, “Good kid! Unexpectedly they escaped.”

Ba Fenghan sighed and said, “These two goddamn kids endurance is indeed astonishing, their courage is even bigger that it wraps the heavens. Junyu still want to go after them?”

Fu Junyu resolutely said, “Even to the end of the earth I want to go after them.”

Listening from below Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other in dismay; they really wished to know why Fu Junyu was ‘fuming with rage between gritted teeth’ and hated them so much.

Ba Fenghan suddenly said, “The rain is getting heavier.”

After a moment of silence, Ba Fenghan’s voice was heard again from above, “Is it possible for me to take care of some business first before I can accompany Junyu looking for those two kids to settle the account?” he said tenderly.

Fu Junyu’s reply was cold, “Who wants you to accompany me? Get lost, go see that Dongming Pai girl!”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly astonished. Could it be that Dongming Pai girl was Dongming Princess Shan Wanjing? Could it be that she already joined hands with Fengshi Han?

Forcing a laughter, Ba Fenghan said, “Junyu, haven’t we come into an agreement to become intimate friends? Why does the tone of your voice sound like you are a jealous lover?”

Fu Junyu said heavily, “Do you really think that we are good friends? This time you, Ba Fenghan, volunteered to deal with those two boys, in the end you only want to win that girl’s favor. Are you saying it was because you really want to be good friends with me?”

Ba Fenghan laughed aloud and said, “If Junyu wants to think like that, there is nothing that I can do. But in conduct and interaction in society, a real man ought to know when to let go and when to act, and not to be controlled by others; only then will he delight in what he say. I don’t care how Junyu views me, from beginning to end Junyu is the first [female] confidante I encountered after I entered the Central Earth.”

Fu Junyu replied indifferently, “You may say whatever you like! From beginning I, Fu Junyu, am already aware what kind of person you are. After killing those two boys, I will immediately return to Gaoli, and will never come back.”

Another gust of wind arose; apparently in her anger Fu Junyu abandoned Ba Fenghan.

Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "This guy is alone now, will we seize this opportunity to launch a sudden attack?"

"Do you have any strength?" Xu Ziling asked back.

Kou Zhong shook his head dejectedly.

Above, Ba Fenghan heaved a deep sigh and then talking to himself, he laughed coldly and said, "Fu Junyu, who do you think you are? How could you understand me?"

Finished speaking, he left immediately.

But Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling who were listening from down below suddenly felt chilliness creeping into their hearts.

The two boys did not find any cave down below. Without any choice they had to crawl back to the cliff above. They waited until the rain eased up, then very gently and cautiously they left the mountain area.

Rushing toward the northeast, they crossed over a green mountain ridge, and picked up some wild fruits in a dense forest in a small valley to allay their hunger. Only after resting for the night and restoring their strength did they continue their journey.

After going through these three days as fugitives, the two boys felt that they had renewed life after the calamity, and that they finally saw light again.

Two days later, they came into a village. Upon entering the village, they asked around and found out that Baling was actually only about fifty li south of this place, and were pleased beyond their expectations. After buying two sets of coarse clothes from the villagers, they found a place to stay overnight, and the next day, even before the sky brightened they already hastened on their way toward Baling.

Aware that sooner or later they would meet either Ba Fenghan or Fu Junyu,

those formidable opponents, they were more interested than ever in training their martial art skill, delving into the newly gained insight of the Yijian principle.

As they took a rest along the way, Kou Zhong said, “Do you remember those two disciples of Bi Xuan, one man and one woman? Looks like they cannot deal with Fengshi Han at all.”

Xu Ziling let out a bitter laugh and said, “Are you talking about Tuoba Fang [sic, it was Tuoba Yu in Book 5 Chapter 9] and his pretty Shimei? Of course I do. We still have the appointment to meet at Luoyang, but it looks like we are going to miss it.”

Kou Zhong said, “We are forced by circumstances, nobody can do anything about it. Ay! We are in such a mess because of that wicked Ah Yi and Fengshi Han, I am afraid even my business deal with Song Yuzhi will come to nothing.”

“What business deal?” Xu Ziling asked in surprise.

Kou Zhong dejectedly replied, “Her Song Family will support Xiliang to become Zhuhua Bang’s Bangzhu, I will kill Tieqi Hui’s Ren Shaoming for her Song Family.”

Xu Ziling was horrified, “Have you thought well what kind of person Ren Shaoming is? If he is someone without an oil lamp [this is literal translation, I don’t know what it means, but I think we can guess ...], he would have been slaughtered by the Song Family early on; why would they need to inconvenience you, Zhong Shao?”

His spirit aroused, Kou Zhong said, “Do you remember what I said about our goal must be far-reaching? Supposing we can make a plan to assassinate Ren Shaoming, Tieqi Hui will received the most severe blow, Lin Shitong will also be like he is losing an arm. One eliminated the other diminished, Zhuhua Bang and Song Clan’s power will rise. It would be a lot more interesting than it is now.”

But then he turned dispirited and downcast, “But now I lose contact with Song Yuzhi, how could we achieve that?”

Xu Ziling said, "I am not averse to assassinate Ren Shaoming. This man has always been notorious, his bad deeds are too many, indeed death cannot wipe out his crimes."

Kou Zhong's eyes lit up, he said excitedly, "Obtaining Ling Shao's approval, things are greatly different. Come! Let us go to Baling first to find Su Jie before discussing this matter further!"

By dusk that day, the city of Baling finally appeared ahead.

The two boys entered the main road and not long afterward they reached the city gate. They saw a flag fluttering from the top of the city wall with one character 'Liang' embroidered on it. The security was very tight, those who entered the city must show their passes.

When their turn came, Kou Zhong braced himself to say, "We are here to pay a visit to our friend."

The city guard eyed them up and down before saying, "Right now the situation is very tense, all unauthorized people are prohibited from entering the city. Quickly get lost!"

Kou Zhong giggled and said, "The friend we are looking for is a Baling Bang people, would officer please make things easy for us?" And then leaning closer, he whispered in the guard's ear, "Would ten taels of silver be enough?"

The soldier coldly sized them up; seeing that the two boys were dressed in coarse peasant clothes, he suddenly shouted, "Guards! Help me capture these two spies!"

More than a dozen city guards swarmed over to surround the two boys.

Kou Zhong waved his hands and said, "We are here to find Xiang Yushan; if you don't believe me, just ask him and everything will be clear."

The soldier asked them in disbelief, "Are you really General Xiang's friends?"

This time it was the two boys who looked at each other in disbelief; how could that Xiang kid suddenly become General Xiang?

Xu Ziling hastily said, "That is certainly the case. We will have to trouble Officer to pass on the message, just tell him that Su Jie's brothers are here looking for him!" He did not dare to report his name, for fear that it might bring unnecessary trouble.

The soldier stared blankly for a moment, and then said, "Turns out Madame Susu's relatives. Guards, report to General Xiang immediately!"

"Madame Susu!" the two boys blurted out.

The soldier looked at them with an odd expression on his face, "Could it be that you don't know your virtuous older sister has married General Xiang?"

The two boys' scalp went numb; they could not utter even half a sentence.

Xiang Yushan, wearing full military regalia, jumped down the horse, walked over to the two boys, and said with great delight, "Thank Heaven and thank the Earth! I have been hoping two Dage's arrival."

Seeing how respectful Xiang Yushan was toward these two boys who professed to be relatives and were dressed in coarse peasant garments, also hearing how Xiang Yushan addressed them as 'Big Brothers', the soldiers were so surprised that they could not keep their mouth shut.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, on the other hand, simply looked at each other with wry smile on their faces; they were not sure how to 'deal' with this Jiefu [older sister's husband].

However, since 'family scandal should not be told to outsiders', Kou Zhong wrapped his arm around Xiang Yushan's shoulders, and pulled him to enter the city. With a cold humph he said, "How could Su Jie be married to you? It must be that you, this kid, used some kind of shady trick to force her!"

Without saying anything Xu Ziling walked on Xiang Yushan's other side, so that they formed a left-right guard against him.

Xiang Yushan hastily said, "How can I, Xiang Yushan, be that kind of person? It is possible that your virtuous sister discovered my infatuation toward her and thus she agreed to give herself wholly in marriage to me. Ay! You don't know that each time Madame remembers you, she is so worried that she always cry. It is good that now you are here!"

Kou Zhong stretched out his arm out of his sleeve and said with a wry smile, "Did you see this? As soon as you said 'infatuation', Laozi's hair immediately stood up."

Xiang Yushan was greatly embarrassed; smiling apologetically, he said, "If I, Xiang Yushan, tell you even a single word of lies, let the Heaven strike me with lightning."

Kou Zhong stared ferociously at him and said, "If you dare to be capricious toward Su Jie, even if you became the Emperor, I will hunt you down and take your little life. Are we clear?"

Xiang Yushan hurtfully said, "How could it be? Two Dage, please don't worry!"

The three of them walked briskly along the street, while behind them about a dozen of Xiang Yushan's personal attendants followed on horsebacks, which prompted the passers-by to look at them with raised eyebrows.

Frowning, Xu Ziling asked, "How did you become a general?"

Xiang Yushan was astounded, "Haven't you heard?" he asked, "After the muddleheaded ruler was killed, Xiao Er Dangjia [second chief] proclaimed himself to be the Emperor in Baling, taking the title of his dynasty 'the Great Liang'."

And then he lowered his voice and went on, "Er Dangjia is actually the descendant of the Southern Liang Dynasty's Emperor Wudi, Xiao Yan, so now he

simply reinstated the title of the former days!”

Kou Zhong nodded and said, “And he always think highly of you; no wonder your face is glowing.”

Blushing, Xiang Yushan said, “That is by two Dage’s grace, together with Xiaodi’s own effort, so that now I recovered completely!”

Kou Zhong let go of his arm draped around Xiang Yushan’s shoulders; he sneered and said, “It’s good that you know your place and call yourself Xiaodi; don’t you ever have any delusion by expecting us to call you Jiefu. Is that right, Ling Shao?”

Xu Ziling spread his arms and smiled wryly, “What can I say?” he said.

Kou Zhong gave Xiang Yushan a hard push as if he was venting his anger. “Come!” he shouted, “Let me increase my knowledge by looking at General Xiang’s qinggong after you recovered from your injury. If we walked as slow as a snail like this, chances are even after daybreak we still can’t see Su Jie.”

Xiang Yushan staggered two steps sideways, but then he shot up and landed on a private citizen’s house, while the two boys hurriedly gave him a chase.

Book 7 Chapter 9 – Deep Love Between Sister And Brothers

Susu's gentle voice came from the inner hall. She seemed to be talking with someone else.

Even until now, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling have not been able to accept the fact that Susu had been married into the Xiang family. Especially since her husband was this Xiang kid.

Even if they thought until their brains burst, they could not find anything good in Xiang Yushan that would attract the opposite sex, something that could make Susu fall in love with him.

The one she loved should be Li Jing.

Like a whirlwind Xiang Yushan entered the inner hall and cried out, "Madame, Bangzhu, look who's here?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, who halted their steps outside the door, were greatly astonished; who did Xiang Yushan call 'Gang Leader'?

"Ah!" Susu's tender voice was heard, followed by another woman's voice, "Let me look for Su Jie."

Unexpectedly it was the Jukun Bang's Gang Leader, the Beautiful Shifu Yun Yuzhen.

She rushed to the door and upon seeing Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, her pretty eyes lit up instantly, while her countenance showed that she was pleasantly surprised. “Heavens!” she cried out in her tender voice, “You are finally here!”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and took a stride forward, reaching out toward her face, he stroked her cheek and said with a laugh, “Beautiful Shifu has lost some weight, could it be it was because you missed your disciples?”

Yu Yuzhen revealed a complicated look on her face; both angry and happy, she stared fiercely at this frivolous ‘disciple’ of hers. In the meantime, Xu Ziling already flitted past these two persons and rushed inside the hall.

Susu was being helped by Xiang Yushan to rise up from her chair, her face revealed a mixture of disbelief and delight as she cried out in her tender voice, “Xiao Zhong! Xiao Ling!”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling’s eyes immediately fell onto her bulging tummy. Everything seemed to be impossible and unreal. It was as if they were deeply lost in some fantastic, bizarre dreamland.

Finished crying, Susu laughed. Finished laughing, Susu cried again. She was so overwhelmed with emotion that she scared Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, who used everything they knew to console her before she was slowly calming down.

Xiang Yushan ordered his servants to prepare a sumptuous banquet, and let the two boys gorging themselves. Susu, Yun Yuzhen and Xiang Yushan also accompanied them eating a little bit.

Talking about what happened after they parted, they chatted endlessly.

Xiang Yushan sighed and said, “We escaped the very night just before Danyang fell to Fu Gongyou, Madame adamantly refused to leave, leaving Bangzhu with no choice but to seal her sleeping acupoints. Du Fuwei has always been like fire and water with us; if we were captured by him, we would surely lose our lives. We left a mark outside the brothel door; didn’t you see it?”

“What mark?” Kou Zhong said with a bitter laugh, “The building had been burned to the roof.”

Yun Yuzhen said, “We waited at Yongshi for the whole month, last thing we heard was that you inflicted great damage to Haisha Bang and Shen Faxing consecutively at Yuhang and Changre. By the time we sent people over to find you, the two of you have already slipped away to who knows where.”

Susu’s eyes turned red again, she said accusingly, “Don’t you know how to come looking for me a bit earlier?”

Xu Ziling hastily apologized, “We are wrong. We have never thought that you would return to Baling.”

Trying to change the subject, Kou Zhong asked Xiang Yushan, “How’s your current situation?”

“Our situation is really not bad,” Xiang Yushan excitedly replied, “We have just taken Yulin and Cangwu, and right now our Right Marshal Dong Jingzhen are fighting over Panyu against the Tieqi Hui. The victor will be the overlord of the South.”

Kou Zhong’s spirit was greatly aroused; he said, “I was just looking for Ren Shaoming to test my saber. Where is that guy?”

Xiang Yushan and Yun Yuzhen were stunned; they stared blankly at him.

“Xiao Zhong always love to do dangerous things,” Susu said with displeasure, “In the south, Ren Shaoming’s martial art is second only to ‘Heavenly Saber’ Song Que, he is equally famous with Lin Shihong. Can’t you consider it carefully? Jiejie wants you to stay to accompany me. Ay! You don’t know how hard it was to worry over you.”

Kou Zhong laughed but did not say anything. Underneath the table he kicked Xu Ziling’s foot.

Xu Ziling shook his head slightly, he was unwilling to stick his head out for him.

Kou Zhong had no choice but to turn to Xiang Yushan to probe further, "If you could deal with Ren Shaoming, Panyu would be yours."

Knitting his brows, Xiang Yushan said, "Let's not talk about Ren Shaoming, merely the Left and Right Law Protectors under him, the Evil Monk Fa Nan and the Amorous Nun Chang Zhen are all first class martial art masters. On top of that, nowadays everyone is afraid of being assassinated, so their guard is extremely tight. Even if Ning Daoqi agreed to personally assassinate him, his chance of success would still be extremely low."

After a short pause, he went on, "Tomorrow I am going to submit memorial to His Highness, he has always had deep appreciation toward two Dage, he will certainly put you in important position, and this Madame will not have to worry about two Dage anymore."

Kou Zhong said indifferently, "No need to bother you! We, two brothers, are accustomed to free and easy life, we are not used to listen to anybody else's order."

And then, ignoring Xiang Yushan's disappointed look, he turned toward Yun Yuzhen and said, "Beautiful Shifu, what kind of business you are running now?"

Casting a coquettish glance toward him, Yun Yuzhen said, "Just menial job delivering goods here and there. Kou Gongzi can't possibly be interested."

Hearing that, Kou Zhong immediately guessed that having acquired Xiao Xian as big supporter, Jukun Bang's power enjoyed tremendous boost, and now they were bearing the heavy responsibility of transporting supplies for him.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "What a coincidence, we are also in the cargo industry now. Ha! I almost forget to tell Xiang kid ... I mean, General Xiang." And then he told Xiang Yushan about Duan Yucheng and the others might arrive at Baling any time soon.

“Why didn’t you guys travel together?” Yun Yuzhen asked in surprise.

Kou Zhong replied nonchalantly, “That muddled-egg Ba Fenghan chased the two of us for several hundred li, how could we go together with them?”

Xiang Yushan and Yun Yuzhen were greatly shocked. “Ba Fenghan?” they blurted together.

“Is there a problem?” Xu Ziling asked in astonishment.

Susu’s flowery countenance lost its color, “You guys really did not know the immensity of heaven and earth. Ever since Ba Fenghan entered the Central Earth, he consecutively defeated several dozens of martial art masters from famous schools; he triumphed in every battle, his reputation flourishes even above the Four Major Clans. Several times several big schools sent their martial art masters to join hands besieging him, last I heard he was able to leisurely escape while still managed to kill a lot of them. How could you possibly provoke him?”

“We are not scared of him,” Kou Zhong sneered, “Were it not for him joining hands with that Korean Fu Junyu, we could have had him bag his food and leave before he finish it.”

Xiang Yushan and the others were dumbstruck.

Yun Yuzhen asked in disbelief, “Korean woman Fu Junyu is even more superior to Luochoa woman. If she really joined hands with Ba Fenghan, how did you two escape with your lives?”

Kou Zhong stroked her thigh underneath the table, making her charming body trembled slightly. And then he shrugged his shoulders and said, “What’s so strange about it? Being hunted and nearly killed was not a proud thing to say, why would we want to toot our horn?”

It was still hard for Xiang Yushan to believe; he asked, “Did you fight with them openly?”

“Of course we did,” Kou Zhong replied, “Otherwise we did not need to run his mother’s several hundred li, until finally we came to this place.”

While Xiang Yushan and Yun Yuzhen were looking at each other, Susu reproached him, “Xiao Zhong! Can’t you be a bit more polite? You still can’t change your bad habit of using foul language.”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “I intentionally used foul language just to hear Jiejie’s touching tone in reproaching me. Ha!”

Although she was happy inwardly, she glowered at him and said, “Xiao Ling is much better than you! So naughty!”

Momentarily the banquet table was rippling with the sincere love between the sister and brothers. The beautiful circumstances when they first met in the past seemed to return this very moment.

When Xu Ziling woke up the next morning, he felt his entire body, from head to toe, was full with qi. Seeing Susu was safe and sound, and that she had found the home of her own choice, Xu Ziling seemed to put down the big stone weighing his heart.

Last night as he lay in bed cultivating his internal strength, his mind, qi and spirit entered an unprecedented level of cohesiveness.

As he lay down, looking at the top of the mosquito net, his mind was focused on the Yijian Sword inspired by Fu Junyu, which was the ideal realm during combat where one was able to grasp all the changes and the constant elements of the overall situation.

When the two sides were facing each other, it was just like they were scrutinizing each other, inevitably they would be able to home on the hidden clue. It was the insight that one could only gain via real combat experience, something that would match his own strength.

Just like the other day Fu Junyu's seemingly random and non-threatening sword strikes toward Kou Zhong, yet Kou Zhong was flustered and could only run in circles; simply because she had the insight to gain initiative, just like in chess, each move could make the opponent struggled to cope.

While he was deep in thought, Susu's voice was heard outside the door, "Xiao Ling! Are you awake?"

Xu Ziling hastily jumped down the bed, put on his outer robe, and pulled the door open to let Susu in.

After seated properly, Susu sighed and said, "Are you guys angry that Jiejie married Yushan? I don't know why it happened but it did; even though I know that you don't like him, but his character is actually very good."

Xu Ziling smiled and said, "Jiejie is oversensitive. At first we did not like him just because there was a bit misunderstanding, that's all! Afterwards we understood, the sky is already clear after the rain, and now we are happy that Jiejie has found a husband according to your wishes."

Things have come to this, what else could he say?

He and Kou Zhong were different.

Kou Zhong did not like Xiang Yushan because he was unpleasant to the eye; but Xu Ziling did not have favorable impression toward him because he was too smooth and evasive worldly-wise.

Susu gloomily said, "Other than Yushan, Jiejie only has the two of you as my close relatives. But Jiejie knows that your aspiration is a thousand li away, and very soon you will leave me. Ay! Does it have to be like this? Why don't you stay and nurture your career here?"

How could Xu Ziling tell Susu that Kou Zhong's aspiration was to vie over the world and become the emperor? And that while he watched all these changes, his real hope was to roam the world like the wild crane in the clouds?

While he was at a loss on what to say, Susu went on, "Other than Li Mi and Dongming Pai, right now the number of people outside who want to get the 'Duke Yang Treasure' from you is really beyond counting, but you don't give the least bit of thought to your own safety. Tell me, what should Jiejie do?"

Xu Ziling felt a big headache coming. Letting out a forced laugh, he said, "I am afraid the number of people who want to kill Ba Fenghan is no less than those who want to kill us, but isn't he still pretty much alive and well? Can't Jiejie not worry about us too much? Just assist your husband and educate the children [idiom] well, when we have spare time, we'd definitely come to visit you. Have you thought about your child's name?"

Immediately Susu's pretty eyes shone. She laughed and said, "Why don't you think for me? See if you can come up with a good name."

And then as if she suddenly remembered something else, she lowered her voice and said, "Does Xiao Zhong really like Yun Bangzhu?"

Xu Ziling found it was getting harder and harder to tell Susu the truth, because the fact was that Kou Zhong was only toying with Yun Yuzhen's feeling, just like Yun Yuzhen used to toy with their emotions. You lied to me, I cheated on you, the one to emerge victor has yet to be seen.

Without any better option he replied vaguely, "I am not too clear about what happened between them."

Susu knitted her beautiful eyebrows anxiously; she said, "Although Yun Bangzhu is very competent, she is not an honorable woman; she has a hopelessly muddled relationship with one of the Gongzi of the Dugu Clan, while she also has a secret affair with Hou Xibai. When you have a chance, go talk to Xiao Zhong! You are the only one he would listen to."

While with his mouth Xu Ziling said yes, in his heart he could only smile bitterly. This sister of his had a very good intention, but her thought was just too naïve; she still thought Kou Zhong as a little child. While the real Kou Zhong in front of their eyes was not someone who could be pushed around by anyone, including

Xu Ziling.

Meanwhile Kou Zhong pushed the door and came in. Seeing the two people inside, he immediately roared in laughter and said, "I thought Xiao Ling was still asleep, turns out he is already chatting with Su Jie who plays favorite. You are not talking about me, are you?"

Having a guilty conscience, Susu's pretty face blushed; she was somewhat at a loss to know what to do.

Kou Zhong was astounded, "You are talking about me!" he said.

Xu Ziling sneered, "What if we talked about you?" he said, "Su Jie is very concerned about you, she is afraid you might fall into some bad guys' trap."

Kou Zhong immediately understood. Laughing involuntarily, he walked over to an empty chair and sat down. "Finally we, the three sister and brothers, meet again!" he said with a sigh.

With a slightly trembling voice Susu said, "Can you stay here for a few days longer? Just consider it Jiejie is beseeching you."

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, "Tonight we are going by boat to Jiujiang. Supposing everything went well, we will be back in a few days."

Susu was stunned, "What are you going to do at Jiujiang?" she asked, "Does Yushan know?"

Jiujiang was a strategic town at the confluence of Lake Poyang and Yangtze River. Currently it was under Lin Shihong's power. Going downstream from Baling, it could be reached within two days' time.

Naturally Xu Ziling was able to guess that Kou Zhong wanted to take the advantage while the salt goods was still on its way to accomplish the assassination mission of the unapproachable Ren Shaoming without making any noise.

If he could really kill Ren Shaoming and afterwards could escape safely, undoubtedly he would gain formidable renown to give him authority over the world.

And after gaining the reputation, naturally everything would go smoothly and easily [orig. what the heart wishes, the hand accomplishes].

Moreover, this way he could also crush Lin Shihong and Ren Shaoming's alliance in dominating the south. Kou Zhong indeed had 'rigorous schemes and deep foresight'.

If the South really fell into Kou Zhong's hands, he would advance to Guanzhong and seize it, and then the various powers in the north could only clench their fists in envy.

Kou Zhong revealed a confident smile as he spoke softly, "At the end of the day I am doing this for Su Jie. Both Lin Shihong and Ren Shaoming could go to Jiujiang to formalize their alliance. If this matter is accomplished, their first order of business would be to forge ahead and take down Baling; therefore, this matter must be broken at the earliest possible time. It was Jiejie's fujun [lit. husband lord] who told me, he also made the arrangement for us. Do you think he is aware of it or not?"

Susu's countenance changed, "How could Yushan let you brave this danger?" she said, "No! I am going to talk to him."

Xu Ziling pulled her tender lily-white hand, and said in all earnestness, "Jiejie please don't worry, what Xiao Zhong said is right; if we don't break Lin-Ren alliance earlier, the South will become a one-sided situation. Even the Song Clan who is far away south at Lingnan will be powerless to stand on their feet, let alone your Baling Bang."

Xu Ziling very rarely parroted Kou Zhong. Although he knew that it was mainly for Susu's sake, Kou Zhong was still very happy, "Xiao Ling is right!" he said excitedly, "Su Jie! Trust us! After cutting off Ren Shaoming's stinky head, we will come back to accompany Jiejie for several days before heading north."

Someone knocked the door. Xiang Yushan came in and said, "After breakfast, we will go to the Palace to see His Highness. Two Dage, what do you say?"

Under the escort of a dozen or so Xiang Yushan's personal guards, Kou Zhong, along with Yun Yuzhen, Xiang Yushan and Xu Ziling, divided into two rows, galloped their horses out of the General Mansion toward the Imperial Palace, which was originally the Zongguan Mansion that the Liang Dynasty's Emperor Xiao Xian rebuilt and refurbished.

Because Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were so eager to see Susu the previous day, plus it was already evening, they did not pay any attention to the city's scenery. It was only this morning that they found the city to be remarkable.

On the north, the city stood against the Yangtze River, on the west it bordered the large commercial hub of Dongting city. The scale was quite grand. The city was square-shaped, with the crossing main street as the central axis. The streets, alleys, and buildings were neat and orderly, most of the houses facing the street had covered veranda, which functioned as a shade in hot summer days and protection from rain during rainy season. Not only it provide convenience for the pedestrians, it also gave cozy and intimate feeling.

All houses had façade with decorative carved pattern, which showed that the residents were well off, everybody lived in peace and worked happily.

Because Baling Bang has always had close relationship with the Sui Dynasty, they enjoyed the domination over the county towns in the surrounding area. Xiao Xian himself was originally a local official, hence he enjoyed the support of the local rich families and members of the gentry.

Since Emperor Yang has died, it was only natural that Baling Bang took control over the local situation, while the county citizens were only too happy to celebrate; therefore, unlike the other gangs and societies who had to go through struggle and the fire of war, the county was able to preserve its strength, and has become the most advantageous condition for the Baling Bang's newly founded Liang Dynasty in their contend for hegemony over the world.

Currently there were six big powers in the South.

The one with the most flourishing prestige was Du Fuwei and Fu Gongyou's Jianghuai Army, which occupied Liyang and Danyang, two big strategic towns. But since for the time being they had to deal with the powers from the north, they had no time to expand southward.

Although Li Zitong occupied Jiangdu, but since Emperor Yang and the Sui Army made a mess of things, their strength suffered a huge setback, so that they appeared strong, but in reality was quite weak.

Shen Faxing's Jiangnan Army was at the Southeast, but since the northwest route was blocked by Li Zitong and Du Fuwei, and the south was prominently under Guangdong's Song Clan's control, it was difficult for him to make any move.

Therefore, the conflict in the South has become the stage for the two big powers, Lin Shihong and Xiao Xian, who refused to concede to each other. Presently the balance of power was leaning toward Lin Shihong, simply because he had Tieqi Hui's help. From this, it was clear that the 'Green Dragon' Ren Shaoming was a crucial factor in the southern arena.

Kou Zhong was able to see through this, hence he came to Song Yuzhi to strike a deal.

If it were any other condition, the Song Clan would not be interested.

This moment everybody was riding along a span of street lined with two-story buildings on both sides. Xu Ziling looked up to enjoy the richly ornamented, carved with fancy patterns, windows and eaves. While the bustling atmosphere of the city gave him an unspeakable feeling, there was another extremely familiar sensation that suddenly bubbled up in his heart.

The same sensation that he felt just before the 'Shadow Assassin' Yang Xuyan mounted a sneak attack.

That instant he knew that Yang Xuyan has arrived.

Book 7 Chapter 10 – Street Assassination

Kou Zhong brashly, but with elegance, helped Yun Yuzhen climbed to her mount, and then he himself also flew up onto the horseback. Side by side they galloped together out of the General Mansion's main gate.

"Beautiful Shifu," he said with a laugh, "You look more and more beautiful!"

Yun Yuzhen lightly squeezed the horse's belly; glowering at him, she said, "Since when did you pick up this bad habit of speaking in flowery language?"

Kou Zhong laughed involuntarily. He shook his head and sighed, while looking at the busy street ahead, full of carriages and pedestrians. "This is called 'it is easier to change mountains and rivers than to alter one's character'," he said indifferently, "Fortunately, the disciple's small fault in the eye of Beautiful Shifu might just be disciple's strong point. Although on the surface Shifu looks sad, in reality you are delighted inwardly. Otherwise, your stern glance would not be so sweet and charming, so captivating."

"Pfft," Yun Yuzhen could not help laughing. "I don't have this kind of inferior disciple who's an expert in 'infatuated with self' skill," she said crossly, "Henceforth you are expelled from my school, never to be readmitted."

Kou Zhong turned his head around toward Xu Ziling and cried out, "Xiao Ling! We are being expelled from Beautiful Shifu's school! Henceforth we can do whatever we please."

Xu Ziling laughed and said, "Don't bother me! I am enjoying the scenery of the city."

Seeing Xu Ziling was unwilling to respond, Kou Zhong turned his attention to Yun Yuzhen and lowered his voice, "I can do whatever I please; Yun Bangzhu, are you scared?"

Yun Yuzhen boldly met his gaze. Giving him a coquettish glance, she said, "If I am scared, I won't personally come with you to Jiujiang. In my eyes, you and Xiao Ling are big kids who will never grow up."

Kou Zhong pretended to be surprised; he said, "Beautiful Shifu forgot that I have kissed you, I have also taken the liberty of running my hands and feet all over you."

Yun Yuzhen's pretty face immediately blushed. In great anger, but in a mosquito-like voice she said hatefully, "Are you forgetting that this is a big street? There are people all around us; shame on you for saying such a scoundrelly words."

Seeing her embarrassment, Kou Zhong cheerfully said, "Enough provoking each other! Which man can incite such an intense reaction from Beautiful Shifu?"

While Yun Yuzhen was unable to ward off, the two of them reached the street with two-story buildings on both sides. Kou Zhong also felt the alarm went off in his heart.

The changes happened so suddenly.

One of the big, finely carved windows facing the street on the covered porch on the second floor of the building, which bottom was approximately two zhang from the ground, suddenly exploded into millions of wood fragments, each one was infused with powerful qi, shooting toward the caravan passing through the street below.

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong, who were already on guard, were the first to react.

In the instant before Yang Xuyan made his move, Xu Ziling has already ascertained that this most terrifying assassin's target this time was not them; rather, it was Xiang Yushan.

This was no doubt a carefully planned mission, not an operation that was executed at the spur of the moment, because they arrived at Baling just the previous night. Unless Yang Xuyan was some kind of an immortal, how could he know that they were going to pass by here and pay him a visit?

Xiang Yushan was an important figure within the Baling Bang. Just like Shen Luoyan of the Wagang Army, his main responsibility was intelligence.

Ever since its founding, Baling Bang has always been engaged in brothel business; the pleasure houses under its banner covered the whole nation, therefore, their news network was very fast and abundant, it could even be said that no other entity could surpass it. The reason Xiang Yushan was promoted to be a general was precisely because he was responsible for this critical task.

If he were assassinated, Baling Bang's striking power would suffer a very heavy blow.

Xu Ziling did not dare to be negligence; while pulling the 'Severing Jade' dagger from inside his trouser leg, he shot up to meet Yang Xuyan midair. Like a thunderbolt Yang Xuyan's sword flashed down amidst the rain of flying wood fragments, his target was Xiang Yushan.

As the alarm went off in his heart, Kou Zhong looked up and saw a blinding light. In that instant, based on previous experience, he knew that he was looking at Xu Ziling's body, but his eyelids were subjected to the pressure from the sword's qi, so that he was unable to see anything.

Were it not for he knew this deceitful trick, by this time any other person would definitely be thrown into panic. But Kou Zhong was cool-headed, like the moon in the well water. 'Whoosh!' The whip in his hand lashed out to the air, carrying with it a sharp whistling noise, ferociously whipping toward the source of the sword qi.

Xiang Yushan, Yun Yuzhen, and all the personal attendants were thrown into confusion. First of all, they were shot by the wood fragments, so that several attendants, who were comparatively weaker, had the qi protecting their body shattered so that they suffered a crushing defeat.

Those with outstanding power like Xiang Yushan and Yun Yuzhen, because their mounts were also being attacked that their legs buckled, they were thrown down in such a sorry state, so they could forget about launching a counterattack.

‘Ding!’

Xu Ziling’s ‘Jade Severing’ dagger parried the tip of Yang Xuyan’s ten-thousand jun [1 jun ~ 30 catties] lightning bolt sword strike.

Yang Xuyan’s sword immediately generated a stream of strange sucking force, so that not only Xu Ziling was complete unable to use his strength, the ‘Jade Severing’ dagger was nearly knocked off of his hand.

Apparently this world famous assassin had never expected anybody to be able to block his sure-kill sword strike. By the time he was about to follow-up with another killer strike, the tip of Kou Zhong’s whip has already arrived on his back.

Even with his skill level, Yang Xuyan was helpless to continue his attack toward Xu Ziling, while dealing with Kou Zhong’s killer move at the same time. Sighing inwardly, he suddenly soared into the air.

‘Swish! Swish! Swish!’

Just before he soared into the air, Xu Ziling suddenly launched three dagger strikes. Yang Xuyan met these three strikes head-on, while at the same time borrowing the reaction force to propel himself toward the broken window on the second floor.

Meanwhile Kou Zhong also pursued behind him, the long whip in his hand shot toward Yang Xuyan’s feet trying to coil it around his ankles. To Kou Zhong’s

surprise however, with some unknown technique, Yang Xuyan suddenly threw his outer robe down; it descended upon Kou Zhong like a cloud.

While Xu Ziling was being forced to fall back to the ground, and Kou Zhong was shifting to the side to evade the enemy's strange tactic, Yang Xuyan disappeared into the hole.

From the time the fight began until now, what everybody saw was Yang Xuyan's ghost-like shadow; nobody was able to see his appearance.

It was only now did Xiang Yushan finally pulled his sword and shouted his order, "After him!" But he himself knew that relying on his astonishing qinggong, Yang Xuyan had already gone that not even his shadow could be found.

Xiao Xian, wearing the yellow royal robe, personally led his personal attendants to go out the door to receive them and lead them to the main hall. Finished listening to the thrilling narration of assassination attempt toward Xiang Yushan, he sighed and said, "Yushan's good fortune is indeed flooding the heavens. If the two Xiao Xongdi were not by your side today, inevitably there would be more chance of misfortunes, less chance of good. It can clearly be seen that my Great Liang Dynasty bears the Heaven's blessing, and no human power can alter it."

This Emperor of the Great Liang's physique was thick and solid; he looked formidable. His height nearly surpassed Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, his age looked to be around thirty-five or thirty-six. Whether he was really enjoying the Heaven's blessing or not, his entire being seemed to glow, his vigor seemed to illuminate other people. It was obvious that his qigong cultivation has reached first-class master's level. Sooner or later he would be able to compete against Du Fuwei and the others in the struggle over the world.

An eternal smile seemed to freeze on his face. Perhaps this was due to the upturned corners of his mouth that made him looked friendly and cheerful. But if one was looking deep into his eyes, one would find some kind of calm and collected composure, as cold as ice and frost, which would make others feel the chill in the air.

This man was definitely not a simple, ambitious and ruthless character of the

underworld.

Yun Yuzhen, who was walking behind him, was puzzled, “In the past, when Emperor Yang was still alive, it could be said that Yang Xuyan’s operation was under that muddleheaded ruler’s order; but nowadays, who is he working for?”

“Most likely Wang Shichong,” Xiang Yushan replied, “I heard that Wang Shichong’s daughter is an outstanding beauty [orig. national grace, divine fragrance], a beauty whom Yang Xuyan admires.”

Meanwhile the procession had reached the main hall. As soon as they stepped in, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were stunned.

They were expecting civil and military officers to line-up on either side, with imperial bodyguards standing around to protect them; who would have thought that not even half a guard was even seen in the main hall. The strange thing was that Xiao Xian took them straight passed the main hall, and into a small hall in the back, where two sets of rosewood table and chairs were arranged in a simple, yet elegant, royal atmosphere.

Even more surprising to the two boys was that Xiao Xian halted his steps, sighed, and said, “This dragon robe and crown is really annoying; so uncomfortable to wear.”

And then two attendants served him in taking off his hat and robe, revealing the scholar attire underneath, immediately giving Xiao Xian some kind of refined, scholarly look.

Noticing the two boys stared at him, dumbstruck, Xiao Xian burst into laughter and said, “I proclaimed myself Emperor because I was forced by the situation. If you don’t declare yourself Emperor, others would think that you lack ambitions; not only would they not be willing to attach themselves to you, they would not be afraid of you either. Therefore, in front of outsiders, I always put an act as the Emperor. But since Kou Xiao Xiong and Xu Xiao Xiong are one of our own, there is no need to do more than is required.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged glances; they both were able to see the

fear in each other's heart. Xiao Xian was indeed not a simple man, his technique in winning others over was brilliant yet subtle; his amiable character attracted others' favorable impression.

Xiao Xian smiled leisurely and said, "Come! Sit down first so we can continue chatting!"

Following his lead, Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling, Yun Yuzhen and Xiang Yushan sat themselves around the table.

Xiao Xian was sitting with his back toward the window overlooking the big garden outside resplendent in bright sunlight. He shook his head and sighed, "It is indeed a pity, Yushan told me that two Xiao Xiong have no intention of joining our army. But everybody has his own ambition; naturally I, Xiao Xian, respect the two Xiao Xiong's decision. Much less two Xiao Xiong and I have made friendships, for which I am very grateful."

Kou Zhong slapped the table and sighed, "No wonder under Er Dangjia's [see Book 4 Chapter 9] leadership, Baling Bang's prestige far surpasses the former glory. Now that I have met Er Dangjia, I suddenly know the reason why."

Xiao Xian chuckled and said, "Kou Xiao Xiong really know how to flatter people. Back to the topic at hand, why do the two Xiao Xiong have so much confidence that you will be able to assassinate Ren Shaoming?"

After a short pause, he continued thoughtfully, "His meteor hammer ranks among the fantastic skill amazing arts, his mastery has reached perfection, suitable for both long-range attack and close combat. In all his life, other than crushing defeat from the 'Heavenly Saber' Song Que that he was chased out of the Lingnan area [old term for south China, esp. Guangdong and Guangxi], he had never met his match."

Kou Zhong revealed a smile full of strong confidence; he said indifferently, "If one does not take a bit of risk, how could he accomplish great things?"

Hearing his heroic, passionate and swelling-with-pride speech, and watching his somewhat hard-to-describe charming smile, Yun Yuzhen's graceful eyes shot

a perplexed expression.

Kou Zhong seemed to sense this; he cast her a glance filled with meaningful smile. This beautiful Gang Leader suddenly felt her cheeks were burning. Angry and bashful at the same time, she hung her head low; her demeanor was graceful, charming, and alluring.

Xu Ziling, who was watching her, was touched as well. His perception on her was slightly improved.

Xiao Xian, on the other hand, acted as if he did not see anything. His gaze landed on Xu Ziling's face and he asked warmly, "Xu Xiao Xiong seems to be a man who values his words like gold."

Full of confidence, Xu Ziling shrugged his shoulder leisurely and said, "Xiao Dangjia misunderstood, I just do not know what to say!"

Xiao Xian roared in laughter. "Well said! I like it best when I make friends with true-natured people. Two gentlemen are both passionate men, men with character, which can be clearly seen from your sister-brother relationship with Madame Susu. Currently, whether the two of you can successfully assassinate Ren Shaoming it is still too early to say, but if it is too dangerous, Kou Xiao Xiong and Xu Xiao Xiong must tolerate him for the time being, let us temporarily drop this subject."

Inwardly Kou Zhong praised Xiao Xian for being formidable. He nodded and said, "Er Dangjia's sincere advice, we, two brothers will engrave it in our hearts."

Xiao Xian said, "This time you are going with Yushan, you may utilize all manpower and physical resources to your aid. Other than being wary of Ren Shaoming, you ought to also keep an eye on Lin Shihong. Not only this man has superior martial art skill, he is crafty, vicious and ruthless. Plus the martial art masters under his command is as numerous as a cloud. One in particular is Cui Juexiu, whom he appointed Guoshi [master/teacher of the state], a man well versed in letters and military skill, whose knowledge and scheming skill surpassed others. You must be especially mindful of him."

Xu Ziling asked in surprised, “It is really not necessary for General Xiang to risk this danger alongside us.”

“I am the only one who is clear about Jiujiang’s situation,” Xiang Yushan interjected, “I can make the most suitable arrangement. If it were some other people, it would be difficult for them to take on this task.”

“If you can advance, then advance; if you must retreat, then retreat,” Xiao Xian decisively said, “Without Yushan accompanying you, how could I feel at ease? Two Xiao Xiong must not refuse.”

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong looked at each other with a wry smile; they both thought that if any mishaps should happen to Xiang Yushan, how could they explain it to Susu?

At dusk that day, a Jukun Bang’s medium sized fast ship departed Baling, going downstream to the east.

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were standing at the stern, looking at the splashing, rippling water on the ship’s wake. The sad scene of Susu bidding them farewell sorrowfully was still playing in their heads, making them nearly wanted to turn back to comfort her, to tell her that they would be by her side forever.

They felt that the heavy burden of Xiang Yushan’s safety has now rested on their shoulders.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “I did not expect Xiao Xian to be such a formidable character; he did not mention even a single word about the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’. Apparently he adheres to his position previously stated in his letter [again, see Book 4 Chapter 9].”

“This man is very difficult to fathom,” Xu Ziling said, “He is somewhat enigmatic. I am sure he is a first-class master in both martial arts and tactics. Compared to the Ol’ Die he is a lot slicker.”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “If there is a master, there must be subordinates.

Now I know where that Xiang kid stole his skill from.”

Xu Ziling silently stared at the as-beautiful-as-a-painting distant clouds and mountains, which were dyed red by the twilight sun, for half a day, before he said in a low voice, “Why do we dislike Xiang Yushan this much? Is it because some kind of prejudice? Or perhaps of jealousy, because he took Su Jie away from us?”

Kou Zhong was slightly taken aback. He pondered over it for quite a long time before finally saying, “Perhaps the first impression is very important. In the first place, he is a businessman who operates brothel and casino; very few of these men are upright gentlemen. Secondly, he abused his power to sell us to that gaudy woman Ren Meimei of Pengliang Hui, so in our hearts we always see him as someone we should not rely on. Ay! Right now we can only hope that his feeling toward Su Jie is sincere, and not just exploiting her to scheme us.”

And then he laughed and said, “How about not discussing this kind of things that will give you headache and make you upset? Very soon we will have the opportunity to leave the ranks of ‘green [or young] head’, one lifetime two brothers, I will let you have the first chance. Have some yiqi!”

Xu Ziling stared blankly for a moment, after half a day he finally understood what Kou Zhong meant; frowning, he said, “You should know the answer. I would rather you go to a pleasure house girl than doing it with Yun Yuzhen.”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, “One big difference between Beautiful Shifu and a pleasure house girl is that she has the freedom to select her opponent from the forest. Besides, women as beautiful as her are extremely rare in the pleasure house. Xiao Ling, you really have no reason to fight against it.”

Xu Ziling replied indifferently, “There is another big difference: you deal with the pleasure house girl using money, while you deal with Yun Yuzhen using emotion. I want to see who will pay higher cost in the end. If you want to exploit her to take control of Jukun Bang, my heart will be very uncomfortable.”

Kou Zhong was silent for half a day. Finally he said in low voice, “Supposing I really like her?”

Xu Ziling sneered and said, "If you really like her, you would not compare her to pleasure house girls."

Kou Zhong said with a wry smile, "Power struggle over the world is something where you cannot yield even for one cun. If I follow your example of always emphasizing principles in everything, my hands and feet are tied. And if I had to contend for supremacy against Li Mi, Wang Shichong, those vicious and merciless, treacherous and cunning foxes, there won't be much difference to delivering my life to die."

Xu Ziling reached out and placed his hand on Kou Zhong's shoulder; he smiled and said, "On this, I understand completely, hence I advised you not to mingle in this turbid pond water. But since you already established great aspiration, I can't possibly stop you from within, so that your hands and feet are bound. But since you asked for my opinion, it is only natural that I won't speak anything against my convictions just to make you happy."

River breeze blew, their clothes created rustling noise.

Kou Zhong stared blankly at the river flow; he muttered, "Sometimes I really don't know what I am doing. So much so that I wanted to abandon everything and just hanging around with you everywhere, passing the free and unconstrained days. But if I did that, I would miss countless exciting things. Furthermore, I really want to spend a bit of my heart and strength for this chaotic world, so that all the people can have days of peace and happiness. Did you forget that we have witnessed firsthand the dreadful catastrophe brought by the fire of war?"

Xu Ziling said, "This is called 'everybody has his own aspiration'. But if you really want to bring happiness to all the people, you can choose virtuous deeds; add to it your zeal, and you can still reach your cherished desire."

Kou Zhong scoffed at him and said, "With that muddleheaded ruler Emperor Yang as an example, I will not trust anybody lightly, especially those people from respected school and big clans, those who practically look down on us, people who came from marketplace. Ay! It's late! We should go to bed and have a good night rest."

Xu Ziling sighed inwardly, thinking that that would be the last time he persuaded Kou Zhong to give up his ambition of vying over the world. Henceforth he would not mention this subject nor persuade him anymore.

Back to his room, Kou Zhong's mood was extremely downcast; he knew in his heart that due to different goals, the difference of opinion between him and his brother was growing wider.

Problem is neither side was willing to change.

He paced back and forth in the narrow, limited space of his cabin. Very soon he entered the state of 'nothingness, forgetting self', in his mental cultivation.

His and Xu Ziling's style of cultivating internal energy were the exact opposite of each other. One moving, the other still. Perhaps it was precisely the difference between him and Xu Ziling. One was seeking excitement, the other was seeking peace and quiet. In the end it turned into Kou Zhong was striving toward hegemony of the world, while Xu Ziling only wished to retreat to some remote mountains.

'Knock! Knock!'

A knock on his door roused Kou Zhong up from deep within his internal cultivation. Pulling the door open, he saw Yun Yuzhen, smiling coyly, standing quietly outside the door.

If this happened before he has had a talk with Xu Ziling, with Yun Yuzhen delivering herself to his door, it would be no time before Kou Zhong would welcome her with open arms. But now not even half a desire between a man and a woman remained in his heart. He simply spoke indifferently, "Not sleeping yet?"

Yun Yuzhen replied softly, "I have just had a talk with Yushan. May I come in to chat with you?"

Neither for nor against it, Kou Zhong simply let her in.

After she was seated, Yun Yuzhen said, “Latest news: Lin Shihong at present remains in Poyang. The day after tomorrow Ren Shaoming may return to Jiuyang first ahead of him, because he has such a crush on the most popular ‘auntie’ of the Chun Zai Lou [lit. spring in the second floor], Huo Qi.”

His spirit greatly aroused, Kou Zhong asked, “Does Chun Zai Lou belong to Baling Bang?”

“How can there be such an ideal situation?” Yun Yuzhen replied, “The first day Poyang Army’s main force entered the city, Baling Bang’s four casinos and two pleasure houses big and small were razed to the ground. And now Baling Bang people in there have to make their living sneakily; if their identity is discovered, they would immediately lose their lives.”

Frowning, Kou Zhong asked, “How are we going to enter the city then?”

“That’s easy,” Yun Yuzhen replied, “Because we have Tieqi Hui’s main force at Panyu under control, and Du Fuwei’s Jianghuai Army is forcing Lin Shihong to deploy his troops to Xin’an County south of Liyang, Jiujiang’s military force is not strong, the city defense is lax. Moreover, due to Lin Shihong’s tyrannical rule and he condones powerful disciples of Tieqi Hui raping local women, he does not enjoy local support, to such an extent that the discipline of the newly recruited people’s militia to guard the city degenerates substantially. No one willingly throws their lives in for Lin Shihong. Among those people, we even managed to bribe some of the military officers.”

After pondering for half a day, Kou Zhong said, “In that case we must seize the opportunity before Lin Shihong arrives to assassinate Ren Shaoming. Do you know if there are any martial art masters by his side?”

Yun Yuzhen said, “Ren Shaoming is very conceited over his own martial art prowess. He always like to travel light with just a small escort of only four, five attendants. But these people are all first-class martial art masters. And if either one of the Evil Monk Fa Nan or Amorous Nun Chang Zhen is by his side, the risk of our mission will increase many times over.”

Kou Zhong asked, “Who are these two, actually? How come they are so formidable?”

Yun Yuzhen replied, “These two are Ren Shaoming’s ministers who have given outstanding service during the establishment of the Tieqi Hui. It is rumored that either Ren Shaoming has some Tiele [see footnote, Book 5 Chapter 3] blood in him, or that Tiele King sent him with covert identity to come to the Central Plains to stir up havoc, because he is extremely cruel to us, Han people. The Evil Monk Fa Nan used to be big bandit of Jiangnan; he killed and burned, raped and looted, and would not stop at anything. Afterwards because he incited the wrath of the people, he finally seek refuge under Ren Shaoming’s wings, while continuing his evil deeds and going on the rampage. Until now, nobody is able to do anything to him.”

Kou Zhong was puzzled, “Isn’t he a man who has left his family [to become Buddhist monk or Daoist priest]?”

Yun Yuzhen simply shrugged her shoulders, “Nobody’s clear about that, nor do any schools or sects acknowledge him as their disciple. All that we know is he loved to wear crimson kasaya [Buddhist robe], plus he shaved his head clean, and he keeps calling himself pinseng [lit. impoverished monk; humble term used by Buddhist monk to call himself]; hence he is known as the Evil Monk.”

With great interest Kou Zhong continued asking, “And how about the Amorous Nun? Is she really beautiful and alluring like a flower, but poisonous like a viper or scorpion?”

Yun Yuzhen gave him a vicious look. “You, men, are really incorrigible; as soon as speaking about beautiful women you give out a malicious, lustful look.”

By this time Kou Zhong had already forgotten about his unpleasant talk with Xu Ziling a moment ago; giggling, he said, “With Beautiful Shifu here, how could I have spare time to think about other women?”

Yun Yuzhen cast him a sweet and charming glance before continuing, “The Amorous Nun is the Evil Monk’s woman. But oftentimes she also fools around

with other men, leaving everything in a tremendous mess [orig. foul black smoke atmosphere], yet Fa Nan seemed to be ‘see no evil, hear no evil’ [orig. not to hear, not to question]. We suspect that Chang Zhen belongs to the world’s most mysterious, most sinister sect, the Yingui Pai.[see Book 5 Chapter 12], even Fa Nan is of the same origin; but we have no way of confirming it!”

Kou Zhong was greatly surprised.

Yun Yuzhen went on, “This pair of wicked monk and nun is Tieqi Hui’s protector of the law, just like Ren Shaoming’s right and left arm. In the past, were it not for them risking their lives to protect Ren Shaoming, it was quite probable that he would lose his life under the ‘Heavenly Saber’ Song Que’s hands.”

Kou Zhong said heavily, “In that case let’s just get rid of them once and for all!”

Yun Yuzhen snapped at him, “Evil Monk and Amorous Nun are practically public enemy number one, but up until now they are still alive and well; do you think it was merely due to their good fortune?”

Kou Zhong stretched; his entire body rose up as he said, “It’s late! We’d better sleep!”

Yun Yuzhen also stood up; she said, “Sleeping early is also good; once we get to Jiujiang, it will be difficult to find such an easy time like this.”

With pomp Kou Zhong swaggered toward the door, pulled the latch, stretched out his finger and lightly flicked it, the oil lamp immediately went off and instantly the room sank into darkness.

Yun Yuzhen jumped in fright. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

Kou Zhong suddenly moved behind her. His long arms snaked out from behind and embraced her. His pair of hands gently stroked her lower abdomen, while he bit her small ear and said, “Shifu, please give me pointers!”

Embraced by him like that, Yun Yuzhen’s tender body weakened. In her daze,

he wrapped his arm over her waist and brought her over to the bed. She could not even utter half a word of protest.

Book 7 Chapter 11 – Penetrating Deep Into The Tiger Cave

Xu Ziling woke up the next day. Declining the offer to get together with Xiang Yushan and the others on the lower deck, he sat in meditation alone in his room.

Every time he finished training, he always felt some kind of contentment and satisfaction, a sense of self-sufficiency that did not come artificially from the outside.

Strange thing was that he used to be like Kou Zhong, who loved to eat. But as his inner cultivation grew deeper, his appetite progressively decreased. He was especially sick of meat and fish, instead, wild fruits and green vegetables became more and more to his liking. So much so that for two, three days went by without eating and he still had no problem.

The reason he wanted to stay alone in his room today was that he left a fantastic development all over his body. Unexpectedly he has shed an entire layer of his skin, just like a snake shed its skin.

The new layer of skin was smooth and tender, almost like a baby's skin, so that his complexion looked different to ordinary men.

Xu Ziling did not care about such changes too much. Lifting both hands up, he struck various poses, while at the same time sending his true qi up to his hands. He started to have more and more confidence to his pair of beautiful, more and more sparkling and translucent, hands. When he concentrated his true qi, even blocking any divine weapon head-on, he was not afraid that he would suffer the slightest injury. Besides, there is no divine weapon that was more flexible and

follow his heart desires.

When he had confrontation with Yang Xuyan the previous day, he clearly felt his progress in the martial art study. Yang Xuyan's sword-play, in which he moved like an immortal, no longer that hard to pin down anymore. It was due to his grasp of Yang Xuyan's fantastic sword technique that he was able to save Xiang Yushan's little life.

Although Xu Ziling was not aggressive at all, he was fully aware of the Jianghu's truth that the strong would rule: if you don't kill, you will get killed; especially in this turbulent era, where justice practically did not exist.

This moment, Kou Zhong walked in in high spirits; after a quick glance, he exclaimed, "Huh? How come you look so much different than before? Your entire body seemed to be glowing."

Xu Ziling replied indifferently, "Haven't you also changed? Look at your smug appearance. But please, don't tell me what happened last night."

Kou Zhong was well-aware that he could not conceal anything from Xu Ziling. Awkwardly he sat down by the bed and said hoarsely, "Some things are bound to happen sooner or later."

After glancing surreptitiously to the left and to the right, he went on, "I heard that Xiang kid said that Ren Shaoming's martial art differs very little to the Ol' Die, at most he is only one or half a notch inferior. Seems like this matter is extremely thorny."

"Do you think Ba Fenghan is formidable?" Xu Ziling asked, "Compared to Ol' Die, isn't he a bit more formidable?"

Kou Zhong knitted his brows and said, "That is really hard to say. My guess is that Ba Fenghan is slightly more formidable, because he is still very young, he is still making progress on a daily basis."

Xu Ziling said, "If we join hands against Ba Fenghan, what do you think our

odds of success?”

Kou Zhong pondered silently for half a day; finally he said with a bitter laugh, “Although we have a higher chance of winning, he will surely drag one of us along to accompany him to the nether world. This kid is really difficult to deal with. That day, were it not for us attacking him while he was unprepared, I am afraid we, two brothers, will have to lie flat in that jungle forever.”

Xu Ziling smiled and said, “Forgive me, but this time I beg to differ. I disagree with your, Zhong Shao’s judgement. If we fight against Ba Fenghan again, he will undoubtedly lose, because I have figured out the Yijian Technique; better yet, I have figured out a way to chop Ren Shaoming’s stinky head.”

Greatly delighted, Kou Zhong said, “This is the first time that I am very excited that you have a different idea. Tell me, quick!”

Xu Ziling turned his gaze out of the window, at the continuously changing scenery of the river bank. With a wistful look on his face he said, “It started when we beat back Li Zitong that time, I discovered that mine and your martial art can complement each other and double our might to become combined striking power, but I could not think of how to actually carry it out.”

Taking a deep breath, he then continued word-by-word, “Last night I finally figured it out.”

Kou Zhong stared at him. “I understand it,” he said, “It’s the Yijian Technique.”

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “It’s precisely Yijian Law. Just think, supposing we can grasp the overall situation, and then transcend the battlefield like the chess board [reminder: ‘yi’ from Yijian means ‘(game of) chess’], relying on our mutual understanding, which we have cultivated since childhood, and join hands to deal with just one person; perhaps even Ning Daoqi, Bi Xuan and other martial art experts their caliber don’t dare to say, but I dare to guarantee that even Ba Fenghan, Ol’ Die and the others will lose their lives, let alone Ren Shaoming.”

Kou Zhong slapped his thigh, “I really understand!” he said, “Our chess technique’s most formidable feature is the constant permutation, completely

without established rules. I am the swimming fish, you are the flying bird; moreover, one cold one hot, who could withstand? Ha! Finally we are nearly unequalled under the heavens [tian xia, China]. It's a pity that we still have to rely on more to take unfair advantage of less."

Xu Ziling shook his head and said, "It doesn't matter how many are the opponents, it will still be the two of us dealing with them. Ah, right! You lost your 'Moon in the Well', what shall you use to replace it?"

Scratching his head, Kou Zhong said, "I am a bit tired playing with saber, but I don't know what kind of toy I want to play with next?"

Xu Ziling said, "That day I noticed that you are very skillful in using the horsewhip. Using the flexible whip to break the meteor hammer, it should be very interesting."

'Whoosh'

The long whip lashed across the two-zhang space on the deck. With Xiang Yushan, Yun Yuzhen, and a group of Jukun Bang disciples as spectators, first it traversed the deck like a quick snake, and then when it was about three chi away from Xu Ziling's feet, the tip of the whip suddenly rose up like the snake's head, and fast as lightning it struck toward Xu Ziling's lower abdomen. Nobody did not gasp in amazement. In Kou Zhong's hand, the two and a half zhang long whip became alive.

Xu Ziling did not even look at it, his right thumb simply pressed down, right at the tip of the whip.

The two boys were severely shaken simultaneously, and both recoiled one step back.

Losing its forward momentum, the whip flicked back toward the top of Kou Zhong's head, where it looped around five, six times. It was very beautiful to watch.

Xu Ziling shook his head, “No way!” he said, “It did not have the same feeling as when it lashed out toward Yang Xuyan.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “It was simply because before I moved the whip, I had a quick look at Beautiful Shifu, so it was hard for me to concentrate.”

Standing on the side, Yun Yuzhen scolded, “You are the one who is inadequate, yet you blamed it on somebody else.”

Xu Ziling said, “Concentration is not the problem; the problem is that it had too much vestige. Flexible weapons have flexible weapon’s characteristic, unlike stiff weapon, such as saber, which is constrained by its direction and angle. Do you have a way to make the whip as if it has eyes on it, and is able to change its course automatically to attack the position the enemy least expected?”

Kou Zhong was staring blankly for half a day. Suddenly, as if the whip had a head and brains of its own, it lashed toward Xu Ziling. When the whip was about to hit, Xu Ziling suddenly sidestepped. Who would have thought that a section of the whip, about six chi long, suddenly bent and coiled itself toward Xu Ziling’s back, and brushed away toward the back of his head?

“Now, that is not bad!” Xu Ziling shouted. With a flash of his body, the whip hit empty space.

The whip seemed to recoil in Kou Zhong’s direction; suddenly the entire length of the whip vibrated in a wave-like pattern, becoming more than a dozen whip shadows, which all flew toward Xu Ziling’s face. It was brilliant to the extreme.

Watching this, Xiang Yushan, Yun Yuzhen and the others could only stare blankly with mouth agape. They all knew that it was the very first time Kou Zhong picked up a whip and used it in a practice, but it was as if he had been using whip for as long as he lived, there was not the least bit of rookie or upstart impression about him.

The most formidable thing was that not only he was able to transmit his qi through the tip of the whip, he was also able to use his true qi to control the whip that it was able to change direction randomly, to attack the enemy at the

position that was impossible to defend effectively.

‘Crack!’

Xu Ziling used his palm to break three whip rings in succession, while flying backward simultaneously, and thus evaded Kou Zhong’s round of attack.

Kou Zhong casually pulled the whip back, which, like a snake, coiled itself around his waist. Raising his hands high he said, “Whip is gone!”

Xiang Yushan was shaken; he said, “If Kou Dage could use other weapon first to confuse the enemy, and then suddenly take out the whip, it could be even more difficult for the enemy to resist.”

Kou Zhong was taken aback; and then he raised his thumb and said, “General Xiang is indeed very astute, I will follow your advice. But you must find a good saber for me. Saber on the left and whip on the right, Ren Shaoming will have to bag his food before he finish eating and go to the nether world.”

A Jukun Bang disciple hurriedly took out the saber hanging on his waist and presented it to Kou Zhong, while shouting, “Saber’s coming!”

Everybody cheered and clapped; they were in very high spirit.

Kou Zhong received the saber. ‘Cha! Cha! Cha!’ he chopped the air three times, emitting a hard and sharp saber qi.

Suddenly the saber stopped. The tip pointed at Xu Ziling.

In a flash Xu Ziling already arrived in front of Kou Zhong. His two hands turned into palm shadows filling the air, ‘hiding the sky and covering the earth’ in an overwhelming offensive toward Kou Zhong.

The saber in Kou Zhong’s left hand rapidly chopped several times. Saber and palms collided, a stream of powerful qi swept through the air like a cyclone,

forcing the crowd to take several steps back.

Suddenly Kou Zhong withdrew. His right hand moved to his waist, like a fierce dragon the whip left his waist and shot toward the pit of Xu Ziling's stomach. And then abruptly it changed course upward to circle around Xu Ziling's neck. The change was so skillful that the spectators could only stare in shock.

Xu Ziling stretched out his finger and flicked the tip of the whip. Who would have thought that Kou Zhong spun his body around? Not only the saber in his left hand hacked down, the whip in his right hand circled around toward the lower back of Xu Ziling's body, lashing around Xu Ziling's legs.

Xu Ziling soared into the air, the tip of his palm swept across the saber's blade, while at the same time his fist shot toward Kou Zhong's face. His movement looked unhurried, full of confidence and at ease, very nice to behold.

The crowd burst into cheering and applause.

Like a swimming fish Kou Zhong slid sideways to evade. He laughed aloud and said, "My mistake was using the whip too early. If I can hack on you that you forget Laozi's whip, I would have a chance to fix you, this kid, up."

Xu Ziling landed on the deck and solemnly said, "That is exactly the crucial point. If you could make Ren Shaoming to go all-out in warding off your attack, the whip would have a chance of success, because not even in his dream he would have thought that you would have another killer move."

Scratching his head, Xiang Yushan said, "Even to my death I could not believe that Kou Dage has never used left hand saber before. Even more unbelievable you have never officially picked up a whip and used it to fight."

After returning the saber to its owner, Kou Zhong walked over with a chuckle. He said, "General Xiang's guess is right; Beautiful Bangzhu ought to have the clearest understanding. In the past, at the beach where our boat crashed against the rock and capsized, day and night Xiao Ling and I trained our martial art, both using our right hand and left hand. When we are in the mood, wild vine also became our whip. Hence now naturally we can easily master the weapons."

Xu Ziling added, “I have to admit that we rely mainly on the fantastic true qi from the ‘Secret to Long Life’, which continuously flowing inside our bodies. Therefore, each part of our bodies can be easily controlled and has freedom of action, our training becomes half the work, twice the effect.”

Yun Yuzhen sighed in envy. She said, “It is still unbelievable. You don’t realize how useless you were back then. Even with one hand tied behind my back, I would still be able to beat you that you fall face down to the left and tumble to the right.”

Kou Zhong changed the subject, “How much longer it is to Jiujiang? I am a bit impatient.”

Xiang Yushan answered, “Two Dage may go up your cabin, Xiaodi guesses we will arrive in about five sichen.”

Yun Yuzhen said with a laugh, “One side calls General Xiang, the other side uses Dage Xiaodi; in the ears of outsiders, your relationship with each other is really hard to understand.”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “What about you and I? One side calls Beautiful Shifu, the other side calls Kou Gongzi or Kou Xiaozi [kid]. What’s the relationship between us?”

Yun Yuzhen cast him a stern look; she said crossly, “Who wants to talk nonsense with you?”

After casting charming eyes toward both Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, her slim and graceful figure disappeared into her cabin.

At this time the sun was setting in the west, the sky over the Great River gradually turned grey. The big ship continued sailing speedily downstream to the east.

At the door of his cabin, Xu Ziling was about to enter to lie in his bed and

cultivate his qi, but Kou Zhong pulled him forcefully toward his room next door. Wrapping his arm around Xu Ziling's shoulder, Kou Zhong took him to the window and said, "Xiao Ling, did you see the beautiful starry sky and the open country outside? The most touching thing is that it contains countless challenges and immeasurable changes."

Xu Ziling laughed and said, "Whatever it is, just spit it out! Do you still have to talk in circle with me?"

Kou Zhong said, "I have a feeling that after last night, I truly think that I have become an adult, and I am eligible to have any beautiful woman in the world. The most wonderful thing is the power over others and the conquering feeling. Normally Beautiful Bangzhu assumed a cold, untouchable haughty manners, but in that moment if I, Zhong Shao want her alive she would be alive, if I want her dead she would die, or perhaps she would want to live and die."

Xu Ziling shook his head and said, "In man-woman relationship, I do not have the desire to conquer the other side at all. I only feel that when the two lovers are in harmony with each other, when they advance to sexual intercourse [orig. the joy of fish in the water], both sides will go hand in hand to pursue and break new ground in some kind of beautiful, wonderful, and boundless realm. Therefore, I can only seek sweet dreams together with a woman that I really like."

Kou Zhong mused, "In theory, I can accept your idealized way of thinking; but in reality I am incapable to break away from the pleasure of greatly spreading out my awe-inspiring conquest. Perhaps this is precisely the difference between you and me. Didn't you say that I am a leader who loves to issue order and be in command?"

After a short pause he patted Xu Ziling's shoulder and said with a wry smile, "Sometimes I really worry that you will turn into a vegetarian Buddhist monk."

Xu Ziling roared in laughter. "Get lost!" he swore, "I just have not met a woman who can command my admiration!"

Kou Zhong sneered and said, "Shen Luoyan, Shan Wanjing, which one is not

beautiful woman who has both first-class wit and charm? Yet your heart was not moved at all. Apart from you basically don't have any interest toward a woman, is there any other explanation?"

Xu Ziling elbowed Kou Zhong's flank so that the latter yelped in pain and had to release his arm wrapped around Xu Ziling's shoulder. Only then did Xu Ziling said indifferently, "The attractive thing about women, more important than their outward appearance is their inner essence and personality traits. Shen Luoyan's ambition is too great, plus she is as cunning as a fox; what could possibly attract me, Xu Ziling? Presently Shan Wanjing and us are like fire and water, so we must stop mentioning her. You used these two women as an example, I should really beat you up."

With a bitter smile Kou Zhong rubbed his painful flank; he said, "I forgot that if we succeed in assassinating Ren Shaoming, most probably we will have another deep and unmeasurable formidable opponent, because that pair of evil monk and nun under Ren Shaoming's banner, or perhaps even Yin Gui Pai might dispatch their people to create trouble."

Xu Ziling stared blankly for half a day. Finally he sighed and said, "This is the price of contending over the world. We are falling deeper and deeper into the trap, in the end, all around us there is no friend, only enemies."

Kou Zhong breathed a deep sigh. He said slowly, "There is an even greater possibility that Ren Shaoming is a spy sent by Tiele King in secret mission to create trouble in the Central Earth; therefore, we may very well be offending two great powers from inside and outside. Are you afraid?"

Xu Ziling smiled and shook his head. He said lightly, "Without these challenges and pressures throughout this life, perhaps it would be difficult for us to pry into the pinnacle of the martial art way. The reason we can come this far is all thanks to every single one of those people who wanted to kill us."

Chou hour that night [1-3am], the battle ship dropped anchor at a hidden jungle in a tributary of Yangtze River about ten li from Jiujiang. There was another ship, a freighter carrying grains, waiting at that dock. On board was Jukun Bang's Deputy Gang Leader Bu Tianzhi and the skilled workman Chen Laomou.

As soon as they boarded the cargo ship, Chen Laomou immediately started to work to alter the appearance of these four people.

First of all he changed Kou Zhong's appearance to that of a merchant with poor taste.

Immensely proud of himself, Chen Laomou said, "In disguising technique, the most critical application is to make others do not expect it, to create something that they cannot associate the new appearance with the old one, something that even an acquaintance will not see through it."

Yun Yuzhen, Bu Tianzhi, Xiang Yushan and Xu Ziling who were watching nodded their heads in praise; their spirit rose up even more. Xu Ziling even gushed, "An imposing figure like Xiao Zhong here, any disguise he takes will always expose some hole. Only by disguising him as a fat man who moves slowly will conceal his disguise from other people's eyes and ears."

Yun Yuzhen said, "Kou Zhong must remember that you are from Yuanling [county, Hunan], taking Yuan River route, entering the Great River, to do business in rice and grain. You are delivering goods to Jiujiang's merchant Xing Fa Long, who has a long-established reputation. Because the army needs provision, Lin Shihong's Chu Army can't possibly give you any trouble. Much less you do have a copy of Xing Fa Long's purchase order and formal customs clearance document."

Looking at his reflection in the copper mirror, Kou Zhong asked Yun Yuzhen, who was standing by his side, "So what's my name?"

Bu Tianzhi, who was standing further down, replied on her behalf, "Kou Gongzi will be Gu An, who, with a little net worth loves to roam pleasure houses and wine shops, but you are rather stingy, hence you are not welcomed by those sisters who love gold."

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, "Is it because you all are afraid that I will squander your money that you made me into such a loathsome character?"

Yun Yuzhen laughed tenderly while covering her mouth. A bit awkward, Xiang Yushan replied, "That is Yun Bangzhu's idea; she is afraid you might really wander around the pleasure house and thus spoil our proper business. Hey!"

Bu Tianzhi went on, "Xu Gongzi is your younger brother Gu Xiang, whom you always bully; he suffers enough from your pushing him to the east and to the west, your constant maltreatment of scolding and cursing him to your heart's content, but since his natural disposition is cowardly, he is angry, but not daring to speak up."

Xiang Yushan added, "I am your family's accountant, your manager; all tedious works belong to me. My name is Gu Ning, your [paternal] cousin."

"So who is Yun Bangzhu?" Kou Zhong asked.

Yun Yuzhen's pretty face blushed slightly as she said, "How about a young concubine you have just acquired?"

Kou Zhong roared in laughter. "I must be afraid someone might steal you away, therefore, even doing business out of town I must bring you along by my side. Ha! Don't forget that we must stay in one room, otherwise people will be suspicious."

By this time Chen Laomou has finished dying the hair on his temples slightly white, making him looked like a forty-something man.

Xu Ziling sighed and said, "Chen Gong [honorable gentleman] is really talented. If Zhong Shao knew how to restrain the divine light in his eyes, nobody would be able to recognize him!"

The cargo ship shuddered slightly, it raised the anchor and set sail.

Early morning, the two ships arrived at Jiujiang.

Under the potbellied merchant Kou Zhong's supervision, the Jukun Bang people, who disguised themselves as porters, unloaded the goods onto mule

carts, which were prepared well by Xing Fa Long. Xiang Yushan, who was disguised as an accountant, went with Xing Fa Long's man to the local water transportation office to file the document and take care of formalities. It was already noon when they all followed the goods into the city.

Surprisingly the city was thriving, but by looking at their appearance and clothing, one would know that they were either traveling merchants or Wulin figures.

Bu Tianzhi was very familiar with the situation here, he informed everybody in low voice, "These past few years Tieqi Hui amassed large quantities of money and goods by plundering and looting, therefore, outsiders are thronging in here, if not for doing business, then for joining the Chu Army. Apparently many people are optimistic about this alliance between Lin Shihong and Ren Shaoming."

Looking out the window, Xu Ziling said, "Looks like these people are well-behaved."

Bu Tianzhi laughed and said, "Because it is still daytime. At night those Jianghu people, either because of personal vendetta or self-interest, would go into hard-fighting; the casualties are not a few. As long as it did not affect the life of the common people inside the city, Tieqi Hui and the Chu Army adopted the 'see no evil hear no evil' stand; but the fact is, it is really very difficult to manage anyway. Especially pleasure houses, wine shops and casinos; anybody who does not have a bit of weight [i.e. social standing] would not dare to venture out at night."

Frowning, Kou Zhong asked, "Does Lin Shihong prohibit outsiders from entering the city?"

Xiang Yushan replied, "That would make Lin Shihong lose a lot of taxation area outside the city, plus a lot of Wulin characters are more-or-less connected to Tieqi Hui, or perhaps they know somebody in Tieqi Hui. Not to mention Tieqi Hui is extremely keen to take in new blood, hence the reason Jiu Jiang is so crowded."

Like most cities in Jiangnan, transportation inside and outside Jiujiang relied mainly on water ways. The principal layout was cross-shaped main flagstone

streets connecting four city gates, wide enough for eight horses to gallop side by side. Lanes and alleys were arranged in square grids crisscrossing the main streets, everything was clear and in good order.

Xing Fa Long was located at Sweet Green Jade Street, in the affluent part of the city. All houses along the street had their gates and multi-leveled buildings decorated with engraved roof tiles, the courtyards were lush with trees and flowers; it was a picture of serenity, without any trace of the fire of war.

River channels interweaved with the streets, the banks were lined with luxuriant trees, with weeping willows brushing the water; another beautiful scenery.

When the mule train pulled into the big warehouse behind Xing Fa Long's shop, everybody breathed a sigh of relief.

By the time they finished freshening up and taking a rest, it was already dusk. They all gathered in a small pavilion at the rear courtyard to eat and drink. Xing Fa Long's owner Niu Fangcai, who was actually Xiang Yushan's subordinate whom he had sent here, was a very competent man. He took this opportunity to report Jiujiang's situation to the party.

Hearing that Ren Shaoming would arrive the next day, Xiang Yushan said, "This time for the ceremony of forming the alliance, Lin Shihong and Ren Shaoming selected Jiujiang, obviously they want to show their fighting power to the world. I don't believe that various powers in the north are not concerned about it; those who are coming to wreck the alliance can't be just a few. Right now Jiujiang ought to be the place where dragons and snakes mingle, we must act with great care."

Kou Zhong said, "Sometimes being too careful won't work. Tonight let us go to Chun Zai Lou [see previous chapter] first to scout the enemy territory, to see if we could exploit the environment over there to slaughter Ren Shaoming."

Niu Fangcai brought out a scroll of painting. After Bu Tianzhi moved the bowls and the dishes away to make room on the table, he spread the scroll. To everybody's surprise, it was an aerial view drawing [orig. bird's eye view] of Chun

Zai Lou; the drawing was very fine and detailed.

Niu Fangcai said, “Chun Zai Lou’s building complex is divided into the front and rear courtyards. The front courtyard consists of three two-story buildings, which are separated by a network of overlapping winding corridors and rock garden and fishponds. It is used mainly to receive general visitors.”

Yun Yuzhen asked, “If Kou Gongzi and the others go there, could they be making merry in this area?”

Niu Fangcai nodded and said, “They should be. The rear courtyard is twice as big as the front one, it is full with trees and flowers, one of Jiujiang’s top ten scenic spots, and is known as the Spring Garden. Ten buildings are arranged symmetrically, it is used mainly to receive VIP guests [orig. with head with face] and those who are willing to spend money. One of the buildings, also called Spring Garden, is for Ren Shaoming’s exclusive use. It is the room he always go to whenever he is in Jiujiang.”

“My granny,” Kou Zhong exclaimed, “That’s it.”

Xu Ziling said, “Uncle Niu is really resourceful, you managed to investigate Chun Zai Lou’s situation very clearly.”

Kou Zhong said, “Based on Ren Shaoming’s influence in here, he could have any woman he takes a fancy to be brought into his private residence; why did he let her staying there so that other people could also enjoy her sweet taste?”

Xiang Yushan said, “That is precisely Ren Shaoming’s character. He will not let himself be preoccupied by any woman that it would negatively affect his great undertaking of vying over the world.”

Kou Zhong asked again, “You must have a spy in there, don’t you? Otherwise, how could you know Chun Zai Lou’s situation like the back of your hand?”

Xiang Yushan nodded. “Of course,” he replied, “We have had the intention to assassinate Ren Shaoming. It’s just that we never had the opportunity!”

Xu Ziling said, “Ren Shaoming is obsessed with Huo Qi, is that also public knowledge [orig. the street aware the lanes hear]?”

Yun Yuzhen shook her head. “Quite the contrary,” she said, “This is a top secret information. Other than select people at Chun Zai Lou, nobody else knows.”

“That is even better,” Kou Zhong delightedly said, “Now who can take me to Chun Zai Lou?”

“Naturally it will be Xiaodi!” Xiang Yushan hurriedly replied.

“It would be better if General Xiang stay here,” Xu Ziling said, “We only need somebody to show us the way.”

Book 7 Chapter 12 – Running Amuck At The Pleasure House

When Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling went to Chun Zai Lou, they changed their appearance again; they now looked just like ordinary Wulin figures.

It was Yun Yuzhen's idea, if anything bad should happen, they could return to their grain merchant identity, and nobody would know their identity.

Under Chan Laomou's skillful hands, Kou Zhong became a thirty-five, thirty-six years old man with a moustache. Xu Ziling wore thick eyebrows and his skin was darkened considerably, to conceal his scholarly and handsome features. He also had five strands of beard, so that even old acquaintances would find it hard to recognize him.

Nobody knows how many ordinary-looking warriors like them were going in and out of brothels every day; therefore, when they appeared, the bouncer at the door [orig. turtle slave doorkeeper] did not pay the slightest attention. It was not until Kou Zhong stuffed a piece of gold into his hand that he realized the visitor was a big, rich man, and thus he busily bowed respectfully with clasped hands and respectfully welcomed them into the guest lounge.

Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "I hope our luck this time is a bit better."

Xu Ziling sighed, recalling that every time they visited a pleasure house, not once the outcome has been good.

Meanwhile the ‘turtle slave’ was pulling the bawd, Bai Niang [lit. white lady, I don’t know whether it is a term to call a female brothel keeper in general], a woman with fancy eyebrows and laughing eyes, to greet them. This time Kou Zhong was getting even more serious, he stuffed two pieces of gold into her hand before saying, “We came here because we admire Miss Huo Qi’s name, Bai Niang must not let us down!”

Bai Niang laughed cheerfully and said, “Two Daye are so generous, of course Nujia will do anything for you! But every night Qiqi is so busy and has no time to spare. Nujia has to think of a way that she could come down and sing you a song to satisfy Daye’s cherished desire.”

How could Kou Zhong accept that? Being more generous at the expense of Xiang Yushan, he stuffed another piece of gold into her hand and said, “Singing in a hurry is just too bland; how about Bai Niang arrange an appointment for me and Miss Huo Qi tomorrow night ...”

“Aiyo!” Bai Niang cried out tenderly, cutting him off, “Tomorrow is even more out of the question, even Nujia is helpless. Ay! You don’t know how popular Qiqi is, if Nujia did not see how generous two Daye are, why would I be willing to receive a scolding to make arrangement for you?”

And then she went on, “Gentlemen please stay here and have some tea, let Nujia go into the inner courtyard on Daye’s behalf to find other courtyard ‘with face’, to select several beautiful women with excellent voice, face and skill for two Daye, and then I’ll come back here to take Daye in.”

The two boys were taken into the noisy parlor and were seated in a set of table and chairs. After taking a cup of fragrant tea offered by a young maid, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stealthily looked around with great interest.

There were more than a dozen sets of table and chairs arranged along the wall of the parlor, all filled with people. Everybody seemed to be afraid that their voice was not loud enough, so they talked and quarreled so loud that the clamor shook the heavens, just like rowdy people at the marketplace.

Kou Zhong sipped his tea for a moment, and then he sighed and said, “Sitting

here in this place, who would have thought that the fire of war is ravaging the Central Earth, and the people are in a terrible situation?"

Xu Ziling spoke in low voice, "You have to be careful, there are two guys by the door staring at us."

Knitting his brows, Kou Zhong muttered, "There should be nothing in our appearances that give us away; what's so good about looking at us, we are not popular 'aunties' of the brothel."

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "We will find out soon enough; one of them is heading our way."

The two boys pretended not to notice, and then when that person sat across the table from them, they pretended to look up in surprise. But as soon as they did, their soul flew away and scattered; they nearly spring up and run away.

Because that person was the Dongming Princess Shan Wanjing, who disguised herself by wearing men's clothing.

But this time her jade face was frosty, as she stared hatefully at the two boys and said, "Even turning into ashes I will still recognize you, two little thieves."

Having just recovered from shock, Kou Zhong recalled that they had indeed stolen her belongings, so her scolding them as little thieves was really difficult to refute. Therefore, he awkwardly said, "Princess, how are you? Long time no see, I can't believe you are not only getting more beautiful, you are getting more mature too."

Dongming Princess Shan Wanjing's eyes were full of murderous intent; she said in heavy voice, "Death is near at hand, you still dare to be loquacious. If I cry out either Kou Zhong or Xu Ziling, I guarantee you will never leave this brothel alive."

And then, turning her gaze toward Xu Ziling, she said mockingly, "I can't believe the haughty and conceited Xu Gongzi is not only a thief, but he is also a

lecherous thief.”

Xu Ziling boldly returned her gaze. Focusing his eyes on her oval face, a hint of wry smile appeared on the corner of his eyes as he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Whatever Princess wants to do to me, just do it!”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Princess seems to have a particularly close relationship with this brother of mine so that your scolding to him was not as severe as to me, Xiaodi.”

Shan Wanjing was slightly taken aback; a complex, undecipherable emotion flashed through her beautiful eyes. And then, looking down, she said, “I indeed have close relationship with the two of you, with your two dogs’ life. Right now I am giving you two options: one, I will expose your true identity, two, you come with me to resolve the problems between us.”

Recovering his rascally character, Kou Zhong asked with a giggle, “Princess, how many attendants do you have this time?”

Shan Wanjing replied with a cold laugh, “To take care of you, two thieves, do I need any helpers?”

Kou Zhong stretched out and said with a smile, “Princess, why don’t you examine yourself: how do you fare compared to your Ba boyfriend?”

Shan Wanjing was greatly stunned. After staring blankly for a moment, she asked, “What Ba boyfriend? Oh ... you ...”

Xu Ziling said indifferently, “We have had confrontation with Ba Xiong. But may I ask Princess, this time you came to Jiujiang, what noble errand brings you here?”

Shan Wanjing was so angry that her seven orifices seemed to be spouting smoke. “My business has nothing to do with you!” she said, “You don’t even have the qualifications to ask.”

And then, glowering at Kou Zhong, she fumed, “Ba Fenghan is just a friend I can get along with, there is no private matters between man and woman involved; don’t you try to make others vomit blood.”

Kou Zhong spread out his hands and said, “How about that Li guy from the Li Clan? Is he also just a friend you can get along with? I am asking this on Xiao Ling’s behalf.”

Naturally Xu Ziling knew that Kou Zhong was exploiting his subtle relationship with Shan Wanjing in an attempt to cross this difficulty; since he did not think it was inappropriate, he remained silent.

Shan Wanjing’s tender body trembled slightly, her jade face turned ashen from anger; gnashing her teeth, she said, “Full of nonsense! I swear that if I don’t kill you today, I cannot conduct myself in the world.”

Laughing apologetically, Kou Zhong said, “Princess, please calm down; in everything we must consider the outcome. For instance, fighting is definitely not a good thing, but if after the fight we can turn the enemy into a friend, this is a good thing. I admit that stealing is not a good thing per se, but if the outcome is the death of that muddleheaded ruler so that your other good friend that Li guy can have a better chance in contending over the world, we have changed a bad thing into a good thing. Hee hee ...! Princess, please be magnanimous, Xiao Ling and I apologize to you.”

Shan Wanjing was silent for half a day. Finally she said softly, “It doesn’t matter if your tongue can grow beautiful lotus flower, tonight don’t even think of escaping alive. Starting from now, within ten breaths, if you don’t come with me out of this place, I will immediately shout ‘Kou Zhong’ and ‘Xu Ziling’. I want to see what good thing will the outcome be.”

The two boys’ scalp went numb, but there was no way they would surrender to her will.

If the grandiose Dongming Princess did not bring any attendants, they did not believe she had the ability to kill them. But that was not the reason of their distress; their biggest headache was that in this fight, they could only take a

beating, otherwise, how could they bite the hand that feeds them by injuring Dongming Pai people?

Seven breaths, eight breaths ...

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged a glance with a determined look on their faces to win.

Nine breaths! Ten breaths.

Shan Wanjing's eyes were flashing with sharp, bright gleam. Suddenly she cried out with her tender voice, "Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling are here."

Her voice was backed by her inner power, the sound shook the main hall, penetrated every single ear.

The main hall suddenly turned so quiet that the sound of a falling needle could be heard, more than a hundred pairs of eyes were staring at the three of them.

Against all expectation, Kou Zhong suddenly laughed aloud. The entire length of his body rose up and he said, "Turns out Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, those two kids are hanging around in here, but why did Xiongtai think it was necessary for you to stretch your throat by shouting and yelling?"

He has not finished talking, Shan Wanjing's palm struck from across the table, carrying an intense qi power, like an arrow it shot toward Kou Zhong's broad chest.

Kou Zhong thought saving his life was more important. Unwilling to reveal his skill, he slipped behind Xu Ziling like a swimming fish.

The hall remained silent [orig. crow and peacock make no sound].

Nowadays, anybody who was moving about in Jianghu would more or less hear about these two boys; not only about the two separate hunt-and-kill decrees on

their heads, but also because of the widely spread rumors of their knowledge of the 'Duke Yang Treasure Trove' secret.

Xu Ziling's eyes shone with unprecedented divine light as he fixed his gaze on the Dongming Princess Shan Wanjing and spoke slowly word-by-word, "Do you know what you are doing?"

And then his palm struck the table. The entire solid Chinese cedar wood table immediately shattered into cun-long fragments, wood pieces sprinkled down all over the floor.

Xu Ziling shouted loudly, "Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling are here. Whoever wants to get the head above our neck may come here to make your move; otherwise, please get out of here, so that we, brothers, won't accidentally hurt bystanders."

With the crashing sound of the table as it broke into pieces, three persons involved, including Xu Ziling himself, jumped in fright.

Xu Ziling was so shocked because he only wanted to slap the table to vent out the resentment in his heart. Because by doing what she did, not only Shan Wanjing put them in a dangerous spot, the most insufferable thing was that she seemed to wreck their entire assassination plot, while the two boys obviously could not do anything to her to teach her a lesson. Who would have thought that his palm was so formidable that such a hard Chinese cedar wood table would disintegrate into pieces?

Kou Zhong was so shocked, first of all because Xu Ziling's palm strength seemed to increase all of a sudden, secondly, because he had never seen Xu Ziling that angry. Momentarily he threw all kinds of problem arising from the revealing of their identity to the back of his mind; inwardly he was comparing Xu Ziling to Du Fuwei, who shattered a rosewood table with his palm power the other day.

Dongming Princess Shan Wanjing's tender heart was severely shaken; other than she had never thought Xu Ziling's skill has reached such state, she was deeply shocked by Xu Ziling's display of power and his unfriendliness. Besides, having provoked Xu Ziling so that his reaction was that intense, she could not

help feeling a bit of regret.

Momentarily the three of them were staring blankly at the wood fragments on the floor. Xu Ziling and Shan Wanjing were still sitting on their chairs, separated by the debris. It was an extremely strange scene.

Most people remaining in the hall were Wulin characters who came from various part of the country. At first some of them were itching to get their hands to capture or kill these two boys, but after Xu Ziling's display of earth-shattering skill, they instantly grew quiet out of fear. One after another those sitting in several tables in the three people's vicinity started to move away in fear.

Kou Zhong was the first one to regain his wits. Pointing to Shan Wanjing, he laughed aloud and said, "Gentlemen! This is a woman who dresses as a man, the Dongming Princess Shan Wanjing. This time she came to Jiujiang to assassinate the 'Green Dragon' Ren Shaoming."

Shan Wanjing was furious; pointing her halberd-like finger she said, "What nonsense are you talking about?"

Kou Zhong winked at her and said in low voice, "You can talk nonsense, we can also talk nonsense; it's only fair. Ha! If we don't drag you down to suffer inconvenience together with us, we are idiots!"

When the people in the hall heard the sentence 'assassinate Ren Shaoming', not a single one of them had his countenance unchanged. Timid merchants and maids and servants were the first to scramble out to escape, followed by the Jianghu people. Nobody knew what would happen next, but either way, nobody wanted to be implicated.

After quite a while, the noisy 'chicken flew dogs ran away' hall became 'people left the hall empty'.

Except for one person, who was sitting on the table near the door.

This person's build was as majestic as the mountain, his countenance

handsome and grand, he wore a blue-green powerful-looking outer cloak; there was an unspeakable terrifying charm aura around him. It was none other than the young Tujue martial art who recently caused sensation in the Wulin world, Ba Fenghan.

It suddenly dawned on Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling that the other day Fu Junyu and Ba Fenghan were talking about meeting Shan Wanjing, turned out the meeting place was this ups and downs city of Jiujiang.

Ba Fenghan rose up to his full height, laughed aloud, and said, "We are separated for only three days, I already have a whole new level of respect for you; I have never thought Xu Xiong's palm power could be this terrifying. Tonight I am brought by fate to meet with two Xiongtai, the Ol' Ba is indeed very happy."

'Qiang!' Kou Zhong pulled the fine-steel saber Yun Yuzhen gave him and pointed the blade toward Ba Fenghan. Heroically and loftily he said, "Mutual desire to meet is better than chance encounter, even more importantly, Ba Xiong is in such a good spirit. Let us, two brothers, send you off on your journey first!"

A strange expression flashed through Shan Wanjing's eyes. With her tender voice she scolded, "Little thief Kou, you think I am nonexistent? Deal with me first and then you can do whatever you want."

Ba Fenghan's murderous intention was greatly aroused, but his face was still wearing a smile. He spoke indifferently, "Right now Wanjing is not the only one who wants to kill you, even Ol' Ba can't stop my hands from itching. How about Wanjing let Xiaodi beat the 'head of the [troops] formation'?"

Xu Ziling rose up suddenly. "Princess' business, we will deal with it in a moment," he said coldly, "But Ba Xiong is just pushing us too far ..."

Shan Wanjing sneered and said, "He is pushing you too far, but you take advantage of superior number to gang up with him, one person. What kind of hero is that?"

Kou Zhong groaned inwardly. The only way they could deal with Ba Fenghan

was precisely by joining hands. If Shan Wanjing insisted on interfering, not to mention she was herself a first-class martial art master, in dealing with her, they must not harm her or kill her; this was the most annoying thing and would definitely assure their defeat.

Completely calm, Xu Ziling spoke indifferently, "If that's the case, let me and Ba Xiong have a one-on-one combat, let's see who is taking advantage of whom."

Shan Wanjing was completely helpless to conceal the slight change in her jade countenance. "Do you want to die?" she said angrily.

Since his beautiful dream of assassinating Ren Shaoming was shattered by her, Kou Zhong has been dying to lie her down on his knees and spank her bottom really good. Given this golden opportunity, he pretended to be surprised, "Isn't that what Princess has in your mind all along?" he asked.

And then, turning to Xu Ziling he said, "Xiao Ling! Didn't I tell you that although on the surface Princess hates you, her heart has always been leaning toward you? Ah!"

'Qiang!'

Shan Wanjing's sword left its sheathe, bypassed Xu Ziling, and turned into dots of cold rays shooting toward Kou Zhong in raging temper.

Seeing her outstandingly exquisite swordsmanship, and her extremely swift and fierce move, Kou Zhong did not dare to be negligence at all; he withdrew abruptly.

Shan Wanjing rounded behind Xu Ziling, forcing Kou Zhong to withdraw to the other side of the hall. She scolded, "Little thief Xu, since you don't know the immensity of heaven and earth, then go to hell for this Princess!"

'Qiang!'

Ba Fenghan suddenly drew his sword. Immediately a burst of powerful, without equal, sword qi shot toward Xu Ziling, who was standing about two zhang away, enveloping him completely in the sword qi, so that even if the opponent wanted to shrink back, it would be impossible to do so.

However, Xu Ziling's mind was as clear as the moon in the well; there was no anxiety over victory or defeat, there was no distracting thoughts whatsoever. Raising the true qi inside his body to its extreme, he withstood Ba Fenghan's astonishing power.

Two young martial art masters, finally brought together into a life and death situation.

Shan Wanjing bit her lip and tightly clenched her silvery teeth; with great difficulty she resisted the urge to look back. Her only hope was that this matter would be over soon, and henceforth she would try her best to forget it all.

Even she herself did not understand what kind of place Xu Ziling held in her tender heart.

On the other hand, Kou Zhong's mind was churning at the speed of light. He was trying to find a way to take advantage of the long whip around his waist, to gain control over Shan Wanjing in one move, and then together with Xu Ziling, they would have a chance to get rid of Ba Fenghan, this formidable opponent.

Ba Fenghan's mind was focused on Xu Ziling; without the slightest bit of hesitation the sword in his hand unceasingly sending out sword qi, no hole left unpenetrated as he tried to look for Xu Ziling's weak point.

Nonetheless, under this intense pressure, the opponent was still standing as stable as the mountain, who automatically exuding 'swallowing-river-and-high-mountain'-kind of qi, with the imposing manner that no gap can be penetrated. Unexpectedly Ba Fenghan did not dare to act recklessly.

While he did not dare to make his move, Kou Zhong did not dare even more. Momentarily four people fought separately in two groups.

All of a sudden there was the sound of gushing wind from all directions, a clear sign that a large number of martial art masters was rushing over to this place.

Ba Fenghan was about to take advantage of this window of opportunity to go all-out and take Xu Ziling's little life, but in a strange turn of events Shan Wanjing abandoned Kou Zhong and rushed over to Ba Fenghan, while shouting tenderly, "We have to go!"

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted; he rushed over to Xu Ziling and called out loudly, "We must also leave!"

Ba Fenghan grudgingly withdrew his qi. Since he had the initiative, he was able to send and retract his qi at will.

Shadows of people flashed through the windows and doors, martial art masters from Tieqi Hui have arrived.

The four people, in two separate groups, soared to the air and broke through the roof, and landed on the roof tile outside. They saw torches everywhere, with countless people surrounding the area.

Kou Zhong laughed heartily and said, "Princess and your Ba boyfriend, I'm sure we will meet again someday."

Winking to Xu Ziling, he traversed the air. The two boys, one after another, flew toward the rear courtyard.

They knew Chun Zai Lou situation like the back of their palm, naturally they were able to escape quite easily.

On the other side, Ba Fenghan and Shan Wanjing knew that if they did not seize the opportunity to escape while the enemy has not yet in position, while their besieging formation was still incomplete, they would have to fight with all their might and might end up dead.

Not daring to be negligent, they ran to the opposite direction and killed their

way out, and escaped to the wilderness.

Sound of clashing weapons was ringing continuously, followed by the clamor of people pursuing vigorously. But the noise gradually went far away.

Book 7 Chapter 13 – Troops Movement Into Danger

That night, Tieqi Hui and the Chu Army, who was responsible for city defense, conducted a house-to-house search operation. Xing Fa Long, where Kou, Xu, and the others stayed was no exception.

Fortunately, everybody had formal entry-exit document, plus Niu Fangcai has secretly sent out bribes, hence they were able to get through this ordeal safe and sound.

After the enemy left, Xiang Yushan made an executive decision, “This time our plot fell through and stood exposed, Ren Shaoming is already alerted, we lost the opportunity. The most terrible thing is that he has seen through our intention to make our move at the Chun Zai Lou.”

Everybody understood that unless it was a public place like Chun Zai Lou, where they could have an accurate grasp of the time and place, basically they would have no way of proceeding with the assassination.

Yun Yuzhen sighed and said, “We will leave town first thing tomorrow morning. The longer we stay, the more danger we face.”

Chen Laomou, who was bandaging the skin and flesh wound on Kou Zhong’s right arm, which he suffered during the escape, nodded and said, “We would be very lucky if we could leave safely.”

Xu Ziling said indifferently, “You all are leaving tomorrow, but Zhong Shao and

I will definitely stay.”

Bu Tianzhi was stunned. “That is not a sensible approach,” he said.

Giggling, Kou Zhong said, “In short, one day we have not died, there is still chance of success.”

Xiang Yushan smiled wryly and said, “In that case we all are staying. Besides, for the time being there won’t be any problem with our identity.”

“No!” Xu Ziling resolutely said, “You must leave tomorrow, while we will pretend we are staying to discuss some business. If you don’t leave, in case we have to leave in a hurry there will be a lot of concerns.”

Yun Yuzhen’s countenance turned pale; she said in heavy voice, “Is this risk worth taking? What’s the difference with delivering your lives?”

Kou Zhong said with a sneer, “Beautiful Shifu, do you think we are idiots who would be willing to die for nothing? Please obediently return to Baling and wait for the news of our victory there!”

Biting her lower lip, Yun Yuzhen spoke with determination, “You are not leaving, I will stay.”

A strange expression appeared on Bu Tianzhi’s face. After staring at his Gang Leader for a moment, he said, “It would be best if two Gongzi tell us your plan. If Bangzhu thinks it is feasible, and she knows that our leaving will be advantageous to the gentlemen’s operation, she might be willing to depart one step ahead of you.”

This remark was reasonable and fair. Kou Zhong sighed and said, “The reason is very simple: Ren Shaoming basically does not have any regards of us in his eyes.”

Xu Ziling added, “Even if he really has any apprehension about us, he would never let others know, or perhaps let his subordinates know. Therefore, he might pretend that he did not care and would still go to Chun Zai Lou to look for Huo

Qi.”

“Of course!” Kou Zhong said with a laugh, “Even when he and Huo Qi are having sex, he would definitely have that pair of meteor hammers stuffed under the pillow. Ha! How can he sleep with that kind of pillow?”

Ignoring everybody else’s reaction, Xu Ziling continued, “Before the assassination operation, all Niu Shu’s [uncle] men over there must leave first, because we are going to use these identities to act.”

Frowning, Xiang Yushan said, “But, under this kind of situation, Evil Monk and Amorous Nun will definitely be nearby to protect their master, even if you have a chance to act, you won’t be able to harm even half a strand of Ren Shaoming’s hair.”

Niu Fangcai also nodded and said, “Ren Shaoming’s men might even greatly enhance the security. Under these circumstances, I am afraid you won’t even get a chance to get close to him.”

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, “If not for the danger, why would we insist on you leaving one step ahead of us?”

Xu Ziling added, “Only when we have no fear of trouble in the rear will we have a chance to escape after the mission is accomplished.”

Echoing one another, Kou Zhong said, “Don’t forget that we are the world best when it comes to escaping. Otherwise we would not be sitting here urging you to cooperate with us.”

Bu Tianzhi agreed, “We understand,” he said. Turning to Xiang Yushan and Yun Yuzhen, he said, “We’d better move upstream to wait for two Gongzi. As long as they manage to get back to the ship, we will be able to leave safely.”

Disgruntled, but had no other choice, Yun Yuzhen grumbled, “You don’t have any chance.” And then she stormed back to her room.

Losing Yun Yuzhen's support, Xiang Yushan was forced to give in. After discussing the details of their plan, everybody returned to their room to rest.

Kou Zhong followed Xu Ziling back to his room. Wrapping his arm around Xu Ziling's shoulder, he said with a laugh, "How did you do that with your palm? You scared the entire hall that they scrambled out in fear."

Xu Ziling pondered over it for a while before responding, "This is really strange. Just like when we were at the 'Training Beach' that day, when we struck unintentionally; before, we never thought about that, after, we could not repeat it. It seems to me that we still have potential that we have not been able to bring out yet."

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "Your stance when you were facing Fengshi Han was also very brilliant. Humph! I want to see if that stinky Princess and that Ba guy still dare to look down on us, two brothers."

Xu Ziling indignantly said, "There will come a day I am going to knock that Fengshi Han down."

Kou Zhong asked in surprise, "You seldom care about victory and defeat, why is it that Fengshi Han is an exception?"

Xu Ziling sat down. He mused, "Perhaps because I feel that he is playing with Yu Yi's feeling?"

Kou Zhong sat down across from him. Leaning forward, he asked in a low voice, "Is it really that it has nothing to do with Shan Wanjing?"

"Of course not!" Xu Ziling replied crossly, "I have never really cared about her."

Kou Zhong leaned back on his chair; slapping his own forehead, he said, "If stinky Princess heard you, she will be inconsolably heart-broken. Toward you, she really cannot distinguish love from hate, otherwise, she would not have come between the two of you, forcing Ba fenghan 'to beat the gong to recall the troops'."

A bit agitated, Xu Ziling said, "It's late! We really need some rest."

Kou Zhong had no choice but to get up to leave. But as he reached for the door, he turned around and said, "Xiao Ling! I really appreciate you. If you were unwilling to stay to help me deal with Ren Shaoming, I would have had to follow the troop home, and that would be the biggest regret that I will never be able to make up." Only then did he push the door and leave.

Xu Ziling flicked his finger to put out the lantern before entering the darkness of his bedroom.

The sound of hoof beats could still be heard from the street outside.

This time tomorrow night, would they still be alive?

Book 8 Chapter 1 – Meticulous Planning

The next morning, the situation inside the city was still very tense. Tieqi Hui's warriors and Lin Shihong's Chu Army could be seen galloping on horsebacks back and forth on the streets, patrolling and searching.

Fortunately Niu Fangcai was in good relationship with the high-ranking military officer guarding the city gate; therefore, Yun Yuzhen, Xiang Yushan and the others were able to leave the city and went on board their ship without any surprise without any danger, so that Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling breathed a sigh of relief.

After Niu Fangcai returned, he fetched a map of the City of Jiujiang, and coached the two boys in detail. He said, "Jiujiang is located at the heart of the route connecting the north and the south. Those who want to travel from south to the north will most likely take the waterway first and then abandon their boat here to continue by land. There is a stone pier at the north side of the old city that has a reputation as 'southern boat northern horse'; it is very prosperous."

Kou Zhong said, "This time Lin Shihong and Ren Shaoming are forming alliance in Jiujiang and announced it all over the world, their intention must be to display their strength to the heroes and warriors from both the north and the south. Ay! Vying over the world is really not a simple matter."

Niu Fangcai went on, "On the south Jiujiang is connected to Dongting [Lake], on the north it is connected to the Great River, network of waterways crisscrossing the city. The main part is the old city district. The city wall reaches fifteen zhang high, with four city gates and three sluice gates. My Xing Fa Long and the Chun Zai Lou are both located at the old city district, only one in the south the other in the north, at the ends of the North Gate Avenue and the

South Gate Avenue, respectively. These two streets meet at the city center, where the city hall, Zhen Jiang Lou [lit. river town building] is located.”

Xu Ziling said, “Fifteen zhang is such a high wall, we will need some kind of tool to climb over it.”

“Or, find a way to slip out via the sluice gate,” Kou Zhong said.

Niu Fangcai said, “The sluice gate is reinforced with double steel walls, extremely sturdy. Plus all three sluice gates are especially equipped with monitoring posts and are being patrolled regularly. Trying to destroy it in advance is also very difficult to do.”

Xu Ziling asked, “Does Niu Shu [uncle] know the patrolling schedule and the times of the changing sentry guards?”

Niu Fangcai proudly replied, “That is our main task, we have all the records. All together there are ten different schedules, which is changing once every five days, and then the schedule will cycle.”

Kou Zhong’s eyes brightened as he said, “As long as we conduct the assassination operation with an accurate grasp of the schedule of the patrols and the changing of the guards, we can get out from the sluice gate before the enemy finds out. But of course we need special tools.”

Niu Fangcai frowned and said, “But that would alert the guards.”

Kou Zhong said, “In that case we might as well get rid of them.”

Niu Fangcai smiled wryly and said, “The guards’ post is on top of the city wall. If you can reach that place, you might as well climb over the wall to escape. But from the city wall, the closest house is at least twenty zhang away, if two Gongzi show yourself in that range, you will be immediately found out, and they are going to shoot arrows from the elevation; it is very difficult to deal with.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Xu Ziling said, “We can stay underwater for a

long time without needing to take a breath, we might as well take the water route, we break the sluice gate underwater and escape from there.”

Niu Fangcai agreed, “If two gentlemen have this kind of diving ability, it is indeed a feasible strategy, because the enemy surely won’t expect that you can hide underwater for a long time.”

But then he sighed and said, “The biggest problem is still that it is impossible to get near Ren Shaoming’s place at Chun Yuan [spring garden] without being detected. This is, of course, assuming that Ren Shaoming will go there to visit Huo Qi tonight!”

Kou Zhong said in a heavy voice, “In that case we’ll ambush him on the way to Chun Zai Lou.”

Niu Fangcai shook his head and said, “Because Ren Shaoming is ruthless and has killed a lot of people, he has a lot of enemies; therefore, he never takes the same route to a certain place. This method will be difficult to implement.”

Having a brainwave, Kou Zhong said, “Aren’t there several banyan trees outside Chun Zai Lou? We can swing the tree up, borrowing the force to cross over the thirty some zhang distance and land on the back of the Xiang Yuan [fragrant garden] roof. Ay! But the escape will not be as easy.”

Xu Ziling said indifferently, “It’s always difficult to have one’s cake and eat it too in this world!”

Kou Zhong took out the aerial drawing of the Chun Zai Lou and spread it out on the table. Pointing to the big tree at the southwest corner outside the Chun Yuan, he traced his finger to another big tree, which scale-wise was about five zhang away from the first tree to the north. He said excitedly, “If we can tie a strong and elastic rope across the top of these two trees, we can escape by catapulting ourselves out. Oh, heavens! If we could lay out several elastic ropes on high places, won’t we be able to come and go like flying? My only concern is that the enemy would notice it first.”

Niu Fangcai was emotionally moved; he said, “That is a wonderful ‘opening the

heaven' idea, but it is feasible. I'll find a way to make arrangement for the ropes. If we put iron hook on both ends, and paint it black, plus we put it high up in the air, hopefully nobody can see it. The only problem remaining is how to conceal all these preparations from the enemy's eyes and ears. Furthermore, can the two Gongzi land your feet on these ropes without missing a hairbreadth?"

Kou Zhong said, "Let the two of us worry about these two issues." Standing up abruptly, he laughed aloud and said, "We'll scout the site first. Unless Ren Shaoming does not go to Chun Zai Lou, he will lose his life tonight."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling sat on the table by the window on the second floor of a restaurant, both were looking out the window.

The first thing that entered their vision was the wide street outside, wide enough for five four-horse carriages to come and go at the same time, and then they looked at the row of shops across the street from the main entrance of the restaurant, five of which were pharmacies. It can clearly be seen that since Jiujiang has always been prosperous, it was the common practice of the residents to frequently rely on medicaments. The other shops were grain retailer, oil mill, cloth shop, grocery store, et cetera.

Every seven or eight zhang, there was a tree planted by the side of the road, to provide shade to the passerby.

Toward the south, the high wall at the northeast corner of Chun Zai Lou's rear courtyard was barely visible. Beyond the wall, behind the trees, patches of dark green roof tiles could be seen. It was a massive building, and was quite imposing.

Inside the courtyard, fresh and green, verdant trees: elms, Chinese scholar trees, old banyan trees, had their luxuriant leaves rustling in the breeze. The trees did not seem to know that a life and death battle involving the fate of the world [tian xia] would happen that night.

Taking a deep breath, Kou Zhong said in a low voice, "We will install the first batch elastic ropes on the trees in this side of the road, and then when we get to the treetops at the other side of the road, we'll install the second batch of ropes with which we can shoot into the courtyard. This way with just a few ups and

downs we could reach the Chun Yuan. We will get out following the same route.”

This moment the waiter came with some noodles. Kou Zhong quickly engaged him in some chitchats.

After the waiter left, Xu Ziling started to eat his noodles and said, “It would be best if we could be one step ahead of Ren Shaoming, lying in wait for him outside the Chun Yuan, so that we won’t have to take the trouble of making our move inside the room. Also it would be a bit easier to escape.”

Kou Zhong nodded his agreement. Looking down, he concentrated on eating and drinking for a moment. But when he drank the soup, he suddenly said in heavy voice, “If we fail to kill Ren Shaoming, we will die instead. We won’t leave unless we succeed. Do you understand?”

Xu Ziling smiled, “Fully understand,” he replied, “If we don’t set up an impassable aspiration, we will never succeed.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “This is actually my business, you should not get involved.”

With a forced smile Xu Ziling said, “Why do you suddenly become sentimental? To achieve success, there is always a price to pay. With any challenge naturally comes pressure; have you thought about such contradiction?”

Kou Zhong slowly breathed out a long breath. Leaning forward a little, he said, “What we are going to do might very well be our, two brothers, most important turning point in life. If we succeed, we will reverse the situation in the south immediately, while our names will shake the world at the same time. Ay! I know that you don’t have the slightest bit of interest in this kind of thing. It is merely to help me that you are willing to risk your life. Tell me, don’t you think I am able of having conflicting thought?”

Dejectedly he slumped back into his chair and said softly, “All you need to do is just say the word, and we will drop the operation tonight.”

Xu Ziling said indifferently, “All will go according to plan! By tomorrow morning, either Ren Shaoming will die a violent death around the Chun Yuan, or Shuanglong Bang will be finished. The only other possibility is if Ren Shaoming never show up.”

Leaving the restaurant, the two boys walked in the direction of Chun Zai Lou, oblivious of anything unusual.

Kou Zhong was back into his usual relaxed self; he whispered in Xu Ziling’s ear with a laugh, “I was right, wasn’t I? That evil princess is very interested in you!”

Xu Ziling casually shrugged his shoulders and said, “Have you forgotten that she and Fengshi Han were having private meeting in here? She is interested in me all right, but her interest is in taking my life, hence I don’t think it is worth mentioning.”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “A woman’s heart is the most difficult thing to fathom. Maybe the reason she is good with that Ba kid is merely because she wanted to forget you. But when she saw you, anything wet and cold will be cast out to the back of her mind.” [Translator’s note: play on words – shi shi han han (wet and cold), the character ‘shi’ and ‘han’ are the same as in ‘fengshi han’ (rheumatism).]

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, “You actually understand narcissistic people. Uh, looks like someone is following us?”

Kou Zhong also sensed it; lowering his voice, he said, “Do you also feel that it was that guy wearing dark green clothes? He has been trailing us as soon as we left the restaurant’s door. Hey! Turn left!”

The two boys turned left into a side street. It was a secondary street only for pedestrians, with tall walls and deep courtyards, a serene and quiet alley, vastly different from the noisy and lively street outside; a very peaceful environment.

“He did not follow us!” Kou Zhong said.

Xu Ziling signaled him with his eyes, the two of them soared up to the left and right, separately jumping over the walls, entering the residents' courtyard on either side of the alley.

Not a moment later the man wearing dark green clothes also flitted over. By the time he heard the rustling gust of wind behind him, his retreat path has already been sealed dead by Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling.

Standing behind him, Kou Zhong said with a laugh, "This Xiongtai ..."

The man suddenly turn around and hissed, "Finally I found you, two kids who don't know how to spell 'dead'."

Turned it was a woman dressed as a man, the big beauty of the Song family, Song Yuzhi.

The three of them stepped out of the alley and walked over to an arch bridge constructed over the river. The stream winding its way toward Chun Zai Lou's side of the city.

Strewn randomly along the river bank were row upon row of houses at different elevations, with the stone steps in front of the houses leading into the river. The scenery was extremely unique.

However, Song Yuzhi's face, which had two strips of moustache on it to enhance her masculine air, was as cold as frost. She halted her steps on the bridge and spoke in a heavy voice, "Why are you still here and have not slipped out? For no reasons you created havoc that now the entire city know that you have come here to assassinate Ren Shaoming, and in the process you destroyed our carefully drawn up plan."

Kou Zhong smiled and said, "I wonder if our agreement is still in effect? Have Miss Song discussed this matter with your esteemed father?"

Song Yuzhi turned her tender body around; seething with anger, she scolded in low voice, "What's the use of discussion? Under present circumstances, nobody

will have any chance.”

Xu Ziling walked over to the edge, leaning against the bridge’s railing, he looked down on the water below, while silently listening to the two people’s exchange behind him.

Calm and unfazed, Kou Zhong said, “As long as the agreement is still in effect, that is enough for me. Miss, please immediately leave the city, I guarantee that by tomorrow you will hear good news.”

“You must be mad,” Song Yuzhi was not happy, “If you want to kill yourself, why don’t you just jump into the river?”

Giggling, Kou Zhong leaned closer to her pretty face; shoving the ‘unbearably vulgar’ fake face with drools at the corner of his mouth to her, he said, “How about making an additional bet? If, under this very difficult situation, I can still succeed, Miss will give yourself in marriage to me, Kou Zhong, okay?”

Song Yuzhi stared hatefully at him for a moment before angrily said, “You fake belly touches me!”

Kou Zhong deliberately used his fake belly to squeeze her a bit before backing off and said with mischievous smile, “Miss has not replied to my question concerning the rest of your life!”

Exasperated, Song Yuzhi said, “Why are you so hopelessly muddled like this? Didn’t I tell you that Die has already promised my hands in marriage to another? Besides, I see that you are always upset and angry, nobody will fall for you; just go home and look at yourself in the mirror.”

Turning around, she looked at Xu Ziling’s back and said, “Xu Ziling! Do you have to accompany him in losing his mind?”

Xu Ziling spoke emotionlessly, “Tonight will be the anniversary of Ren Shaoming’s death. Miss Song, please leave the city immediately.”

While Song Yuzhi was stunned by Xu Ziling's answer, Kou Zhong, assuming a distressed face, said, "Turns out Miss Song has had a change of heart, you are now falling for Xiao Ling. I, Kou Zhong, have no choice but to declare my withdrawal from this competition; I only want to kill Ren Shaoming and ... ow!"

'Slap!'

With a crisp slapping noise, five traces of Song Yuzhi's slender fingers immediately appeared on Kou Zhong's face, even the grease and powder were scraped off of his face quite a bit.

Song Yuzhi herself was shocked, "Why didn't you dodge?" she asked.

Stroking his stung face, Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, "I wanted to see if I can sober you up, so that later on I won't have to cause trouble or illness to you."

Song Yuzhi wanted to say something, but in the end she held her peace, and turned her beautiful face to look at Xu Ziling.

Xu Ziling stood motionless, with his gaze fixed on a fisherman who had just appeared from the bend of the river; he seemed to be deep in thought.

Kou Zhong saw several people were walking toward the bridge where they were standing. Pulling Song Yuzhi's sleeve, he said, "Go home, let's talk about this later!"

Xu Ziling suddenly trembled slightly. "My Niang!" he exclaimed, "Zhong Shao! Fishing line!"

Forgetting Song Yuzhi, Kou Zhong walked over to Xu Ziling's side and said in great delight, "We are really stupid! What can be more elastic and invisible than fishing line in the world? That time Shen Poniang [reminder: b1tch] used super long fishing line to trap us, and in broad daylight!"

That moment those people were walking passed them, the three people

remained silent.

When those people were out of earshot, Song Yuzhi asked in bewilderment, “What are you guys talking about? Have you really turned crazy?”

By this time, how could Kou Zhong be in the mood to bicker with her? If they were using fishing line, plus it was installed ten zhang above the ground, ordinary martial art masters would find it difficult to see, especially if they were not intentionally looking for it. Since now they had to move as soon as possible, Kou Zhong simply laughed and said, “Miss Song, please move your jade self out of town. There is a good chance that tomorrow you will receive report of success!”

At the end of her patience, Song Yuzhi snapped, “No! I want the two of you to follow me leaving the city.”

Kou Zhong was stunned. “Turns out Miss Song is so concerned about us,” he said.

Song Yuzhi suddenly recovered her cold, detached demeanor. “Of course I am!” she replied in soft voice, “If the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’ fell into Ren Shaoming and Lin Shihong’s hands, the whole world will suffer a calamity.”

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, “Turns out you are that good to me. Never mind! Let us now go our separate ways, but don’t forget the agreement; otherwise your Song Family and I will have nothing to do with each other anymore.”

Song Yuzhi’s voice was as cold as ice as she stared at him and said, “Do you really want to deliver your life?”

Bright and shiny light flashed through Kou Zhong’s eyes. “Exactly,” he said decisively.

“Then go ahead and die!” Song Yuzhi spoke indifferently.

Brushing her sleeve, she walked away. Just like that.

Book 8 Chapter 2 – The Fish In The Net

By dusk, darkness gradually descended upon the sky.

From behind the high wall of Chun Zai Lou came the melodious sound of birdsong. After looking to the left and right and saw no one, Kou Zhong hurriedly responded with birdsong.

Xu Ziling looked down over the wall, and then together they ran to an alley some distance away. Halting his steps, Xu Ziling reported, “Everything is in order and ready. According to plan, I put five strings of heavenly silkworm fishing line on the designated treetops inside the courtyard. How’s the situation at your side?”

“Naturally there is no problem,” Kou Zhong replied proudly, “We are going back to the restaurant this morning, eat a little something, and then we’ll proceed according to plan.”

In the noisy restaurant, most customers were Jianghu people, the topic of the conversation did not depart from Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling’s feud with Dongming Princess at the Chun Zai Lou the previous night.

Kou Zhong perked up his ears to eavesdrop for a moment; radiant with delight, he said, “Turns out our reputation in Jianghu is so resounding!”

Xu Ziling replied in very low voice, “We’ll talk about it after tonight!”

Kou Zhong nodded. “This is my weakness,” he admitted, “I am very easy to be so pleased that I lose my sense of measure. Right! I wonder where are Fengshi

Han and the stinky princess hiding? If they are hiding in a small room together, the stinky princess' chastity cannot be guaranteed."

Xu Ziling nonchalantly said, "You still have time to think about such thing? I am more worried about Song Yuzhi did not have the opportunity to leave town!"

Kou Zhong was speechless for half a day. Finally he sighed and said, "It seems like you really don't care about Shan Wanjing; otherwise, after hearing me saying that, how can your expression be as natural as before."

Xu Ziling laughed and swore at him, "Good kid! Unexpectedly you are harboring the intention to sound me out. Time is running out, let's go!"

The two boys paid their bill and went down the stairs. As they stepped out into the street, their countenance changed.

Because they saw the big and round moon was just showing its immortal beauty at the eastern horizon, and for tens of thousands li above the sky was without a cloud. The moon bathed Jiujiang with its radiant light. It was a completely different night to the cloudy and dark night of the previous day.

"Damn it!" Kou Zhong blurted out, "In this kind of bright moon night, as soon as someone looks up to admire the full moon, we are finished!"

"Too many ears," Xu Ziling hissed, "Let's go someplace else and talk."

A moment later the two boys jumped over the wall into the courtyard of a large residential building. They shed off their outer disguise clothes and scraped the powder and paste off of their faces to reveal their real identity. Inside, they were wearing black skintight night walker suit.

Kou Zhong fetched his broadsword and whip, which he had hidden in this place earlier. After putting it on, he smiled wryly and said, "This is called 'man proposes but God disposes'. How would we know the moon would come out so quickly?"

“No use complaining,” Xu Ziling said, “We’ll look at the situation first, if it is impossible, we’ll have no choice but to slip away via the waterway.”

Jumping high and crouching low, the two boys returned to the roof of the restaurant they had just left, and cast their gaze toward Chun Zai Lou in the distance, to observe the situation carefully.

Kou Zhong was greatly surprised, “That’s strange! How come I don’t see anything like ‘both covert and undercover officers keeping watch’? Could it be that Ren Shaoming is afraid of death and did not show up? Xiao Ling, what’s your feeling?”

The rear courtyard of Chun Zai Lou was dedicated to serve VIPs only. All ten buildings in this courtyard were brightly lit, with a faint sound of strings and woodwind instruments coming through. Because it was still early, only maids and servants were occasionally seen moving about.

Xu Ziling took a deep breath and replied, “I have an uneasy feeling.”

Kou Zhong stared blankly for half a day; finally he said in low voice, “Shall we beat the gong to recall the troops?”

Xu Ziling slowly shook his head. His tiger eyes shot sharp gleam that Kou Zhong has never seen before. He said calmly, “If we shrink back on approaching the battlefield without knowing what is true and what is false, this matter will stay as a scar in our heart and mind that will be difficult to mend! It will prevent us from ever reaching the pinnacle of the martial art realm, it will also represent our fear of death.”

Kou Zhong heaved a heavy sigh, breathing out the heroic pride that was surging wildly in his heart. “Well said!” he said huskily, “Even if the enemy is spreading out the net waiting for us brothers to fall into it, we still want to penetrate deep into the tiger cave to stroke Ren Shaoming’s tiger whisker. This is called treading various deathly places to come back to life later.”

Looking at the brook flowing toward the Chun Zai Lou, Xu Ziling said, “This river runs through Chun Zai Lou’s rear courtyard. Anybody with discerning eyes

would know that this is a shortcut to sneak into Chun Zai Lou, hence we must not use water route to get in.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Question is: will Ren Shaoming come? If he is coming, the Chun Yuan and its surrounding area will be packed with martial art masters, so we cannot enter from the air either. It leaves us only the land route, and this way it will be very difficult to avoid falling into a heavy siege, which will force us to fight with all our might and will have death as the conclusion.”

Xu Ziling smiled and said, “Can you see the fishing line installed horizontally between those two trees?”

Kou Zhong turned his gaze twenty zhang away toward the empty space spanning the top of two old banyan trees outside Chun Zai Lou’s rear courtyard. Due to the trees reflecting the moonlight, even after sending enough qi to his eyes, he still found it difficult to see the fishing line that he has personally tied on there. Thereupon he shook his head in satisfaction.

Xu Ziling said, “I have conducted an experiment: as long as you jump straight up and reach any spot approximately one zhang away from the line, you could barely see the line reflecting the light, and thus you can accurately grasp the line’s position.”

Delighted, Kou Zhong said, “If we were using pitch-black rope, under this kind of moonlight, it would be difficult to hide it from other people’s eyes.”

Calmly Xu Ziling said, “We must change our plan; we must be sure that Ren Shaoming has arrived at the Chun Yuan before we break through Chun Yuan with ten-thousand jun [1 jun ~ 30 catties] lightning bolt force. If with one strike we fail to hit the target, we will have to leave immediately by means of the fishing lines installed in many places. This act will definitely be outside the enemy’s expectation, so that they can’t even touch the corner of our garment.”

The two of them carefully studied the route and method to break through into the garden, before they finally hid themselves and took turn in surveying the Chun Yuan’s situation, while waiting quietly for the ‘Green Dragon’ Ren Shaoming’s honored self to make his appearance.

While watching the Chun Zai Lou from afar, which was gradually starting to get busier, Kou Zhong said softly, “Ever since we started, we always wanted to go to Luoyang, but until today we haven’t been able to go. This time, after returning to Baling, we must immediately go north, I wonder if we can make a detour to Luoyang?”

Xu Ziling was lying down on the side of the roof opposite to Chun Zai Lou, where the moonlight could not reach, and was counting the stars in the sky. Hearing Kou Zhong, he sighed and said, “Don’t overestimate our luck too much; moreover, He Clan’s jade annulus involves martial art masters Buddhist nuns of the Ci Hang Jing Zhai [see Book 1 Chapter 7]. If you are not careful, you may have to bag your food before you finish eating. At that time please do not implicate me, your little brother.”

Kou Zhong said in distress, “You guessed it again. Can’t you pretend you are a bit dumber?”

And then he sighed and went on, “I’ll say Song Yuzhi’s impression on you is much better than her impression on me. Hey! Are you interested? She is in no way inferior to Shan Wanjing or Shen Luoyan.”

Xu Ziling irately replied, “Don’t you remember her Die already betroth her to someone else?”

Kou Zhong sneered and said, “Laozi don’t believe it a bit, everything under the heavens can be changed, much less mere verbal engagement? Strange thing is, she must be over eighteen already, why hasn’t she passed through the doorway [i.e. getting married]? There must be a problem somewhere.”

Xu Ziling said indifferently, “You can do whatever you want to do, why make so many excuses?”

“My Niang!” Kou Zhong suddenly exclaimed softly, “Ren Shaoming is here.”

Xu Ziling turned around and crawled to Kou Zhong’s side. Looking over the top of the roof ridge, he fixed his gaze on the direction of Chun Zai Lou’s Chun Yuan.

He saw a flurry of activity. Although he could not see clearly who was coming, yet he was able to tell that a VIP has arrived; otherwise, that person would not have such a large number of entourage.

More than a dozen people filed into the Chun Yuan, leaving only four men, who looked like bodyguards, to stay outside the door.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other in dismay.

Could it be that Ren Shaoming was not afraid of assassination at all?

“Is this a trap?” Kou Zhong wondered aloud, “But perhaps he really thinks we have slipped away.”

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, “Now we can only ask Laotianye’s blessing and protection. Let’s move!”

The two flipped over the rooftop and fast as demon and ghost they flew over another building, and then hiding along the trees lining up the riverbank they headed toward the external wall of Chun Zai Lou. Since they could not use the waterway, they jumped over the high wall, and landed at a flowerbed in Chun Zailou’s backyard. Without the slightest pause they flew toward a lush tree nearby, to hide and look down to survey the surroundings.

From all ten buildings in the complex came the sound of laughter mixed with the sound of music. The complex across the courtyard from the Chun Yuan was even more bustling with noise.

Other than the four bodyguards at the door, they did not see any other guards around the Chun Yuan.

Xu Ziling pointed to the fishing line again and said, “We’ll split to see if Ren Shaoming has his men hidden somewhere around here, and then we’ll meet again on that big tree behind the Chun Yuan. We’ll decide how to proceed then.”

Kou Zhong nodded his agreement. The two immediately split up.

A moment later, one after another they were back on the big elm tree behind the Chun Yuan, which was about a zhang or so taller than the other courtyard.

Xu Ziling sighed and said, "It doesn't make any sense. Even if Ren Shaoming is not worried, his men would not be so negligent like this."

Kou Zhong looked down at the Chun Yuan roof below him, he said with a wry smile, "I also feel that something is definitely not right. But it is also possible that Ren Shaoming is not afraid of us or any other people. If we withdrew just like this, there is a chance that we missed an extremely rare good opportunity. I really want to take a peek inside, but perhaps we won't escape Ren Shaoming's eyes and ears."

Xu Ziling said heavily, "We'll separately crash into Chun Yuan from left and right. When we see a big man with pock-marked face and a tattoo of green dragon on his forehead, strike immediately. If it is a trap, break out of siege from the front door, remember that the seventh life-saving fishing line is between the two big tree fifteen zhang from the front door."

Once they made up their mind, they swept down noiselessly and landed on the roof below. And then separated to the left and right they flipped over the eaves and charged inside.

'Bang! Bang!'

The wooden window shattered, the two boys broke into the main hall of the Chun Yuan. Quickly their eyes scanned the room and immediately they knew that they had fallen into a trap.

Sitting around the two sets of table across the hall from the main gate were more than a dozen men. Not only they did not see anybody that looked like the 'Green Dragon' Rhen Shaoming, they did not see even half person of the pleasure house's misses and maids. There were no food and drink on the table, on the contrary, there were all kinds of weapons in tight formation.

As soon as the two boys' feet landed on the ground and they sprang back up,

the enemy was swarming toward them.

The two boys met in the middle of the hall. While they were about to charge toward the main gate before the enemy arrived, they heard the sound of wind as a clump of rosy clouds suddenly descended from the beam toward the top of their heads, so that even if they wanted to jump up, they simply could not.

At the same time countless torches lit up the area surrounding the Chun Yuan, so that outside was as bright as day; however, they did not hear a single shout.

In just a short moment, the two boys have turned from 'gods appear and devils vanish' assassins into 'the fish in the net', as they discovered that they had been heavily surrounded.

A sharp, intense, ominous and cold qi was pressing down above their heads. With a loud shout Kou Zhong thrust his broadsword up. Meanwhile Xu Ziling raised both palms up; his right palm looked like it was lifting up a thousand-jin rock, but his left palm was light and floating indeterminately, giving a weird feeling those who watched him.

A bald, beautiful head suddenly appeared from the rosy clouds, it was precisely the 'Amorous Nun' Chang Zhen.

Her big eyes that could hook souls and melt spirits were black and bright, her delicate face was radiant with healthy glow, the corners of her thin, beautiful eyebrows arched upward, her cheek bones high, her nose straight, her pink lips matched perfectly with her straight, snow white teeth, so that her alluring aura was shining down on the two boys like the sun.

'Bang!'

The jade face faded, the rosy clouds swiftly pressed down.

Kou Zhong felt his long saber was hitting a soft, pliable material that he was unable to continue pushing the saber farther. In his shock he withdrew his saber and retreated toward the main gate.

The force from Xu Ziling's heavy, overbearing right palm was also neutralized by the brightly setting-sun-red-clouds colored long robe, while surprisingly enough the yin-force of his left palm was met head-on by the opponent. A strange, demonic true qi, which was so gentle and reserved as if it did not exist, but so powerful as if it was capable of seizing his soul, penetrated his palm. In his shock Xu Ziling rolled away on the ground, so that borrowing the rolling momentum he was able to dispel the opponent's qi.

'Amorous Nun' Chang Zhen did not get it easy either.

Basically she was looking down upon these two boys; she was thinking of subduing them with just one strike. Who would have thought that the two boys' true qi was vastly different from each other? One cold the other hot; it was extremely strenuous for her to dissolve them.

Although her school's unique skill 'Melting-Soul Colored Clothes' [the dictionary gave me this definition: Ravishing Technicolor Dream Coat] was not only able to execute countless changes but was also very good at dissolving internal energy expert's true qi, she was still struggling not sustain injuries on the spot.

But when she clashed with Xu Ziling's left palm, which carried similar gentle and reserved character as hers, she was helpless to dissolve it, so that she had no choice but to meet it head-on.

Letting out a tender grunt, Chang Zhen's entire body bounced back upwards.

By this time Kou Zhong had already rushed toward the closed main gate. Lifting up his foot, he kicked hard.

'Bang!'

By the time the wooden door succumbed to his leg and broke, four spears swiftly stabbed him. Blurs of shadows outside filled his eyes. Moreover, because of the torches, it was difficult to tell how many people were out there.

Suddenly there was a warning sign in his heart, something was attacking him from behind.

It was the barely audible sound of secret projectile splitting the air.

In that instant, Kou Zhong had to make a decision; he could only deal with either the attack from behind the door he was about to break through, or with the secret projectile threatening his back. If he evaded the projectiles, these four spears would arrive, and most probably he would lose the only chance of escaping by means of the seventh fishing line.

This moment, not only he had forgotten about his desire to contend for the world, he even forgot his own survival. His only thought was that even if he was struck by the secret projectile and died, before his death he could still cut a bloody path out of a battlefield, so that his good brother would have a path to escape alive.

Letting out a wild roar, Kou Zhong brandished the long saber in his hand to create hundreds and thousands of sharp rays, the saber and the person had fused into one entity, with a sudden increase in speed he shot like an arrow toward the four spear-wielders, who by this time were almost climbing over the steps leading into the hall.

Meanwhile Xu Ziling rolled behind Kou Zhong's back. From his angle of view, he saw the 'Amorous Nun' Chang Zhen, while bouncing back into the air, while she was still high in the air, was shooting a handful of fine needles the size of cow's hair, which, like a swarm of angry bees, were flying toward the back of Kou Zhong's head.

By this time, the thirteen men who were originally sitting around the table, were also charging toward them and were already less than a zhang away from where he and Kou Zhong were. If he delayed even for an instant, the two of them would immediately be engaged in a hard battle.

Their situation was deteriorating rapidly, and it was about to get worse.

From the windows to their left and right more people were charging in; if they

stayed in the hall, they would definitely die without any chance of survival.

This was definitely a carefully laid out trap. The enemy seemed to know their plan like the back of their hands. First they were posing as all kinds of brothel visitors, and went to the other courtyard next to the Chun Yuan. Therefore, although the two boys did not see any ambush around Chun Yuan, there were actually hidden troops everywhere, which, in the end, gave rise to the current situation, where the boys were heavily surrounded.

Xu Ziling sprang up, his palms made a circle in the air as if he was holding a ball, like magic the fine cow's hair needles Chang Zhen shot were caught inside the qi generated by his palms, and then making another circle the needles were whirled out violently.

The cow's hair needles became a rain of sparkling dots, completely shrouding the twelve men charging at the two boys.

Amidst the miserable scream, the men scrambled away in panic. In the flurry five men were hit by the needles.

Xu Ziling himself did not know since when he became this formidable, and this moment he had no time to think. He swiftly backed off until his back was nearly touching Kou Zhong's back, who by this time was starting to fight his way out the door. Lightning fast Xu Ziling's left and right hands reached out to snatch a saber and a sword, which were threatening Kou Zhong's back. Exerting his internal strength, he sent the two attackers flying backwards while spurting blood from their mouths. And then with a backhand swing, he sent the saber and swords in his hands out, each weapon lodged itself into the incoming enemy's chest.

Finally the two boys reached the yard in front of Chun Yuan's main gate. The distance to the seventh fishing line was only about thirteen zhang away.

But it felt like a journey through ten thousand crags and torrents.

From the main gate the enemy flocked out, blocking the two boys' retreat path.

Under the dancing flame of the countless torches, they saw all around them were hundreds of enemies. They were trapped inside layer upon layer of heavy siege. Even to make one step progress they had to exert 'moving mountain and draining sea' kind of effort.

With every single chop of his saber Kou Zhong exerted enough power that as his saber was drawing a sharp rainbow, either the enemy blocking his saber was thrown back, or the enemy was shaken and was forced to retreat.

Suddenly a spear and a saber attacked together from left and right, both were full of power; obviously these two attackers were outstanding martial art experts among the enemy's ranks.

Not only Kou Zhong already forgot about life and death, his mind was as calm as the moon in the water, which could reflect clearly every trace of change in this battlefield.

He quickly figured out that it was impossible for him to block these two different weapons coming from two different angles of attack before the weapons made contact with his body.

In normal times, he would be able to deal with the attacks by changing his position. But under the circumstances, even moving one step would entail withstanding very heavy pressure from the siege, plus if he evaded, Xu Ziling behind him was bound to suffer a calamity.

With an angry snort his long saber slashed diagonally down, faster than lightning, to pare the enemy's saber. His right shoulder also exerted powerful force, it shrank and immediately pushed out. 'Qiang!' the saber-wielding enemy splashed blood and tumbled backward. At the same time blood also spattered from Kou Zhong's right shoulder.

The enemy's spear slipped off his shoulder, but when he wanted to follow-up with another thrust, Kou Zhong's shoulder continued on to crash against him that he was thrown back with blood spurting out of his mouth.

The enemy's ranks were immediately thrown into confusion. Wasting no time at all, Kou Zhong's saber and body moved as one, he swiftly charged forward.

Xu Ziling took all attacks behind Kou Zhong, so that Kou Zhong did not need to worry about any trouble in the rear.

The most formidable benefit was that whenever they were shaken by enemy that their qi and blood were churning, or perhaps they were out of strength at the end of a move, as long as Xu Ziling bumped his back against Kou Zhong's, the two boys' qi would complement each other, so that they were able to maintain their power throughout the battle.

Xu Ziling concentrated his true qi on his four limbs. With each clash of his limbs with the enemy's weapon, he transmitted his power via the weapon, shaking the enemy that they were thrown back with depleted strength and fell to the ground.

This moment two spears attacked together from left and right, carrying with it a tornado-like wind, so that their breathing was somewhat restricted. Apparently the attackers were not ordinary warriors.

Xu Ziling stayed calm without the slightest sign of fear. Ignoring the many wounds on his body, his left hand swept backward, his right hand slapped straight on, meeting the opponent's tidal-wave like surging spear rays; his technique was exquisite beyond imagination.

'Pow!'

His right hand met the tip of the spear. The spear wielder staggered to the left and bumped into another spear wielder.

Xu Ziling had already snatched the man's spear and thrust it to the man's lower abdomen.

By the time the two men screamed miserably and fell to the ground, with the spear in his hand Xu Ziling walked backward behind Kou Zhong, creating millions

of spear shadows, forcing the enemies to stagger, exposing a large area of empty space.

The seventh fishing line was still ten zhang away.

‘Dang!’

A crisp sound shook everybody present. At the same time, Xu Ziling felt Kou Zhong was slamming onto his back, and his internal energy penetrating Xu Ziling’s body.

Like a tidal wave the enemies surrounding them retreated. ‘On behalf’ of Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling used his internal energy to neutralize the enemy’s qi entering their bodies. And then turning around, he used the spear in his hand to attack the enemy who forced Kou Zhong back.

‘Dang!’

The enemy used his staff to sweep at the spear, parrying Xu Ziling’s attack. The staff’s momentum continued exerting heavy pressure on Xu Ziling, forcing both sides to take half a step back.

Both men were shocked. Surprisingly, the terrifying enemy did not seize this opportunity to press on; he withdrew three steps back instead, and then stood up holding his staff horizontally across his chest. Turned out it was a tall, ferocious bald monk wearing red Buddhist robe, with steel hoop around his forehead.

The ‘Evil Monk’ Fa Nan.

With him guarding the escape route, there was no way Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling would be able to reach the seventh fishing line.

Meanwhile more than a dozen layers of enemies already surrounded them. They had become the bird in a cage, the fish in the net, completely without any way out.

A cold snort followed by tender laughter came from behind.

And extremely seductive female's voice said, "Fa Nan Bro [orig. ge er – brothers/boys, very informal]! You are glaring like a tiger watching his prey as if you want to swallow these two boys whole, how can they turn their heads around to admire nujia?"

Fa Nan's huge eyes twinkled with laughter. He raised his heavy iron staff and put it on his shoulder. From one side he walked around to the other side, keeping his eyes on Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, sizing them up.

The two boys also slowly turned around, following Fa Nan with their eyes, there was no time to admire the 'Amorous Nun', until finally they came face to face with the one whose prestige shook the southern part of the country, whose reputation was second only to the 'Heavenly Saber' Song Que, who was equally famous with Lin Shihong, the 'Green Dragon' Ren Shaoming, the target of their assassination mission.

Book 8 Chapter 3 – Turning Defeat Into Victory

It did not matter how many people were standing by Ren Shaoming's side, he would be easily recognized at a glance.

This was not only because of the baring-its-fangs-and-brandishing-its-claws green dragon about half a hand palm size tattoo on his forehead, but because of his very particular shape and sharp and harsh expression.

Ren Shaoming's skin was shiny like burnished bronze, his entire body looked as if it was made of cast metal. His height exceeded Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong. Wearing black tight warrior outfit with white cloak, the contrast was quite intense, giving out the impression that he was extraordinarily powerful.

His wide face was covered with pockmarks, his eye sockets were deep, his eyebrows were prominent on the ridge of his skull above his eyes, dark and thick like two strokes of dense ink. His long and narrow eyes were flashing with sharp cruelty that incited fear and hatred in the hearts of other people as he coldly stared at Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong.

His bigger-than-average hands were hanging loosely on either side, each hand was carrying a meteor hammer forged of hardened steel, about as big as a human skull.

Standing on his left was the 'Amorous Nun' Chang Zhen, whose gaudiness radiated all around; on his right was a tall and slim scholar; with his tapered face and the moustache above his lips, he looked a bit like a goat. But his eyes were bright and cool.

By the time the Evil Monk came to Chang Zhen's side, the tall and slim scholar spoke up with a laugh, "Zaixia Cui Jixiu. It's nice to see Xu Xiong, Kou Xiong."

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong exchanged glances, both felt fear in their hearts.

This Cui Jixiu was the number one strategic adviser under Lin Shihong's command, he was bestowed the title Guoshi [teacher/master of the state] by Lin Shihong, the new Emperor of Chu. He was widely known as a top strategist of the present age. It was very likely that the trap tonight was planned by his brilliant mind.

Sure enough, Cui Jixiu laughed and said, "It is said that new-born calf has no fear of the tiger; therefore, while everybody else thought that two gentlemen had sounded out the difficulties and retreated to avoid defeat, Zaixia was quite sure that the two gentlemen would move the troops into danger. By lucky coincidence Zaixia's guess is correct."

The 'Amorous Nun' Chang Zhen let out a silvery bell tender laughter, her beautiful eyes were rippling with bright light as she swept her gaze over the two boys several times before saying, "Two brothers' skill is out of the ordinary; if you are willing to switch your allegiance to Huizhu [society master/leader, similar to Bangzhu for gang leader], Huizhu can't possibly treat two gentlemen with meager hospitality."

Ren Shaoming let out a cold snort before speaking unhurriedly, "If you want to switch your allegiance, you must do so in good faith. You don't need me to teach you how to do it!"

Kou Zhong said, "Is it possible for us, two brothers, to discuss it first?"

Ren Shaoming nodded, "As you wish!" he said.

Wrapping his arm around Xu Ziling's shoulder, Kou Zhong put his lips next to Xu Ziling's ear and said softly, "If we don't surrender this time, we'll lose our lives for sure."

While his mouth said so, his hand lightly squeezed Xu Ziling's shoulder, indicating that he was lying.

Noticing Ren Shaoming was watching them with rapt attention, Xu Ziling caught on. At the same time, he felt Kou Zhong was writing 'fight' and 'fishing line', three characters on his shoulder. He whispered hurriedly, "Unless he can personally defeat us, how can we surrender without any fight?"

Kou Zhong nodded. Stepping away from Xu Ziling, he laughed aloud and said, "If Huizhu wants us to surrender to you, you must defeat us first, and then we, two brothers, will immediately present the 'Duke Yang Treasure' as our meeting gift."

Unexpectedly the several hundred people in there grew quiet, only the crackling noise of the torches was heard.

A faint smile of disdain appeared on the corners to Ren Shaoming's mouth. He looked like he was about to respond when Cui Jixiu spoke up, "What if Huizhu defeats you separately? Will that count?"

Kou Zhong really wished he could punch this man's face a couple times. Pretending to be proud but astounded he said, "We, the two kids, are only lowly juniors of younger generation, plus right now we are already injured and are weary. If we are fighting one-on-one against Huizhu, won't we show too much disrespect to him, the Senior?"

The 'Evil Monk' Fa Nan raised the gigantic a zhang and a half long staff in his hand a little bit, and then he stomped heavily it against the floor. Not only it created a loud dull thud, it also seemed to make the earth shook. He laughed wildly and said, "Just let Pinseng [impoverished monk, a humble term used by Buddhist monk of himself] serve two brothers then! Why must we inconvenience Huizhu?"

Xu Ziling said indifferently, "If Dashi [great master, a term of respect to address a Buddhist monk] loses, will that be the same as if Huizhu himself loses?"

Fa Nan was taken aback. The ominous glint in his eyes reappeared.

Ren Shaoming let out a cold snort again and said, "If I don't fight personally, it will be difficult to make the two of you submit wholeheartedly. Come!" Finished speaking he took a large stride forward.

As soon as he took the first step, immediately suffocating killing aura filled the air. With his second step, a burst of unmatched powerful aura assaulted Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling. If they were ordinary fighters, they would have been shivering in fear early on, abandoning everything and run for their lives.

It was only this moment that Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had firsthand experience of the prowess of this overlord of the black way [i.e. criminal world] whose name has been shaking the southern sky.

Involuntarily the Tieqi Hui men who were surrounding Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling took a few steps back, opening up an even larger ring for this decisive battle.

Kou and Xu, two boys fully realized that this man's character was fierce and fiery, hence by the time he took the third step, he would immediately launch a violent offensive. Therefore, pretending that they were intimidated by his powerful aura, they retreated backward. One saber and one spear flashed as they struck a pose, ready to fight.

Naturally the people behind them did not know that the two boys were only about seven zhang away from the fishing line traversing the air above them; afraid that they would bring disaster to the fish in the pond [must be an idiom, but I think the meaning is clear], they backed off even more, opening up three more zhang of space behind the two boys.

Just by moving four more zhang, they would be right below the fishing line.

Right now the two boys were only thinking of slipping away unharmed.

As time passed, Ren Shaoming's imposing manner suddenly soared. With a flick of his wrists, two meteor hammers suddenly turned into millions flickering red dots as they reflected the torches flames, just like swarming bees and dancing butterflies, stunning everyone present.

It was only after looking at Ren Shaoming's skill did Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling finally understand why Song Yuzhi said that they did not know the immensity of heaven and earth. They had never imagined that someone would be able to handle the heavy meteor hammers and made them dance in perfection.

The astonishing pressure did not come only from the direction of Ren Shaoming in front of them, rather, it appeared to come from four sides, eight directions.

The more shocking thing was that Ren Shaoming was able to utilize the reflection of the flame so that he appeared to be vanishing, hiding somewhere in the flickering lights.

The two boys were unable to either advance or retreat; forget about any essence of the Yijian Technique of transcending the chess game board. Furthermore, after the hard battle they had just gone through, they could not even use half of their normal strength.

Suddenly a ball of flashing shadow, carrying with it a strong, severe gust of wind, smashed toward Kou Zhong's left shoulder.

Kou Zhong realized the incoming attack just in time. With a loud shout he raised his saber to block.

A loud 'dang!' resounded. Kou Zhong staggered sideways toward Xu Ziling.

The flashing shadow scattered, like a ghost Ren Shaoming suddenly appeared. Like flashing thunder the two meteor hammers in his left and right hands pursued Kou Zhong, who by this time was unable to retreat farther.

A violent stream of qi exploded, forcing the several-zhang away spectators to back off even farther away. The miserable plight of Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling who bore the full brunt of this explosion need not be mentioned.

Ren Shaoming did not spare any strength, relying on his powerful true qi, he

relentlessly pressured the two boys that they were unable to move a single step; employing a blitzkrieg strategy, he wanted to finish these two boys in the shortest time possible, and thus showing off his prowess in front of his subordinates. To his shock however, even after fighting with everything they had, the two boys were still able to fight tenaciously.

And now that he saw Kou Zhong was losing steam, how could he miss this opportunity? Immediately, with the power of a ten-thousand-jun thunder, he was ready to subdue the two boys in one fell swoop.

At first glance, it appeared that his double-hammer chain attack was going to strike the two boys dead. But actually he had hidden softness in the middle of hard, so that he could seal the opponent's acupoints.

Kou Zhong slammed hard onto Xu Ziling. Contrary to everybody's expectation, Ren Shaoming's included, the latter's tiger body suddenly went stiff, so that Kou Zhong's body recoiled and shot toward Ren Shaoming's double hammers.

While Ren Shaoming was greatly stunned, Kou Zhong, taking advantage of Xu Ziling's true qi replenishing his own, so that not only his qi and blood recovered and was able to flow unimpeded, also taking advantage of Ren Shaoming's slight gap due to his shock, brandished his saber and hacked down on the gap, so fast that nobody was able to see clearly.

Ren Shaoming quickly retreated half a step back. Letting out a muffled grunt, his left and right meteor hammers recoiled, and with unbelievable precision clamped down on the blade of Kou Zhong's saber. His reaction was shockingly fast that everybody gasped in amazement.

'Crack!'

The long saber snapped into two. Holding the broken saber in his hand, Kou Zhong fell back in shock.

The meteor hammers turned into flashes of shadow filling the air, hiding the sky and covering the earth, they continued to enshroud him.

While Kou Zhong was crying out for his Niang in his heart, Xu Ziling's spear suddenly slipped through his flank and shot straight toward the center of the flashing shadows.

The flashing shadows dispersed.

Even with Ren Shaoming's ability, he was still forced to take two steps back by this strange move, which broke his toppling-the-mountains-and-overturning-the-seas attack.

'Dang!'

The right hand meteor hammer clashed with the spearhead and was jolted sideways, while the spearhead was also jolted away by the impact.

While Xu Ziling's hands were going numb from the shock, Kou Zhong tossed his broken saber away, snatched the spear, and then with a loud shout he turned the spear into millions of light and shadow enveloping Ren Shaoming, using the 'sweeping a thousand-army' stance.

Even if this Society Leader of Tieqi Hui thought until he cracked his brains, he would never understand why after receiving such a heavy blow, contrary to his expectation, Kou Zhong was able to counterattack dauntlessly with such power that was even stronger than before.

Inevitably Ren Shaoming's imposing manner was somewhat impeded; without any other choice he was forced to spin around. Unexpectedly he entered into Kou Zhong's spear shadows, his meteor hammers moved fast toward Kou Zhong's spearhead.

As a result Kou Zhong was unable to unleash the full potential of his spear technique. Holding the spear right in the middle, he used both the spearhead and the butt of the spear to parry the swift and fierce meteor hammers left and right.

The two combatants moved very fast. Amidst the raging meteor hammers

shadow, the spear shadows, two human shadows were weaving in and out like rabbit escaping from the falcon. It could easily be seen that they were both fighting with everything they had in a life and death battle.

Xu Ziling soared high toward the top of Ren Shaoming's head. He could clearly see that Kou Zhong was already like an arrow at the end of its flight. Not daring to hesitate, he tossed away the thought of escaping from within his brain. With a cold shout both of his hands clawed down on the top of Ren Zhaoming's skull.

By this time the several hundred people watching felt as if they were suffocating, hence nobody even thought about shouting and cheering. The arena was so quiet that it felt unreal.

'Dang!'

The spear in Kou Zhong's hands snapped into two pieces, while blood spurted wildly from his mouth; fortunately just before the meteor hammers touched his body, he managed to slip away like a fish, so that Ren Shaoming, who was absolutely sure that his hammer would hit Kou Zhong, had to see the hammer hit empty air instead.

Only then did Ren Shaoming lower his body in a horse stance, while raising his two hammers to meet Xu Ziling's palms overhead.

'Bang! Bang!'

Xu Ziling's entire body was jolted by the collision and he was thrown up toward the empty air bathed in bright moonlight.

Kou Zhong was thrown away for more than three zhang, so that the spectators were forced to back off some more.

Before his footstep was even steadied, he already leaped up to the sky with outstretched arms, while exerting his entire strength to catch Xu Ziling's body, which was thrown into the air. "Xiao Ling, run!" he shouted.

Ren Shaoming let out a long laugh. He also shot half way up before suddenly turned direction midair toward the two boys.

Xu Ziling reached backhandedly to grab Kou Zhong's collar, pulling him along as they ascended two more zhang upwards before tossing Kou Zhong outward.

Everybody thought that knowing their defeat was decided, the two boys wanted to escape. They all jeered and shouted insult to the two boys as well as cheering for their leader.

The surrounding net expanded outwards, taking the shape of a kitten playing with a mouse. They wanted to see how Ren Shaoming was going to toy with the two boys.

Ren Shaoming started later, but he arrived sooner. When he was about a zhang away from the boys, he casually put his pair of meteor hammers behind his back first before reaching out to grab the two boys' back.

The most unexpected thing happened.

Suddenly, right in the middle of an empty air, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling separated, and paused for a split second.

Ren Shaoming could not help but was greatly amazed, because he knew that it would be very difficult for him to stop midair and exert any strength, yet the opponents seemed to be able to hold their body still midair and borrow the reaction force to bounce back. While he was shocked out of his wits by this strange happening unfolding before his very eyes, like powerful arrows the two boys shot back toward him.

Everybody on the ground was also shouting in shock, yet nobody was able to stop whatever it was from happening.

At this point Ren Shaoming's true qi had been depleted; he was no longer able to change his move to resist the enemy. On the other hand, the opponent was still able to go all-out; therefore, compared to before, the situation this time was

vastly different.

‘Bang! Bang!’

Ren Shaoming took Kou Zhong’s punch and Xu Ziling’s palm strike, respectively. While he was going to borrow the reaction force to withdraw, suddenly his neck was wrapped by a flexible whip, which coiled forward from behind him, cutting off his escape route.

And then there was a sharp pain at the top of his head, because Xu Ziling’s finger jabbed his tianling acupoint, a vital acupoint at the top of the head.

‘Bang!’

Sucking in another mouthful of qi, Kou Zhong spun around; just before casting his whip away, he kicked the pit of Ren Shaoming’s stomach. Ren Shaoming’s breastbones shattered, blood spurted out wildly from his mouth.

By the time Fa Nan, Chang Zhen, Cui Jixiu and the others recovered from their shock and rushed over, the two boys already borrowed the impact force against Ren Shaoming to soar upward again. Their toes bounced on the fishing line, like big birds they soared toward another fishing line about eight zhang away.

‘Crash!’

Ren Shaoming’s lifeless body crashed heavily on the ground.

By the time Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling crawled up the bank of the Great River, they had already left Jiujiang about ten li behind.

This moment the sky has not brightened yet, but the two of them were extremely exhausted. They could only crouch on a mud mound on the shore, unable to move a single step.

Gasping for breath, Kou Zhong groaned, “Finally we got rid of that Ren guy. Ay!

He was really formidable, I am afraid Fengshi Han would not be able to kill him; yet ... Ouch!”

With difficulty Xu Ziling raised his head to give him a glance before burying his face in the mud again. Straining hard, he said, “You don’t know how ridiculous your battered and exhausted look right now. Is it painful?”

Still gasping for breath, Kou Zhong said, “As long as I am not laughing, it is still bearable. I just did not expect that under the circumstances, we were able to stab that dragon to death. Ha! Aiyo!”

After resting for half a day, Kou Zhong went on, “Since we are heading to Luoyang anyway, we might as well slaughter Yuwen Huagu along the way to avenge Niang.”

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “You must never feel so pleased as to lose your sense of measure. This time we could kill Ren Shaoming, we relied on a little bit of good luck as well. It could be that because he had done so much injustice that he was finally strung through and filled with evil. Besides, although Yuwen Huagu’s fate is not so good that he suffered setback, he still has the Yuwen Clan’s support behind him. Plus Yuwen Shang is a grandmaster whose martial art cultivation enjoys equal fame with the ‘Heavenly Saber’ Song Que. Zhong Shao, you’d better concentrate on your effort to strive for the world!”

After a short silence Kou Zhong said in a heavy voice, “But how could I see you braving the danger alone?”

Xu Ziling said, “Let’s wait until we find the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’ before doing anything! Huh? A ship is coming our way!”

A medium sized sailboat appeared from the bend downstream, coming fast at their direction.

Kou Zhong strained his neck to look, “Did you see that?” he said happily, “The ship is flying the Song Clan banner; must be Song Yuzhi coming to find us.”

Xu Ziling responded heavily, “Before recovering our strength, it’s not a good idea to meet with anyone.”

Kou Zhong nodded his agreement. Together with Xu Ziling he crawled into a pile of rocks, resolutely suppressing his inclination and waited quietly while the ship came and went.

By daybreak, relying on their fantastic skill of complementary true qi, they managed to restore about eighty, ninety-percent of strength. After bathing in the river, although their clothes were still worn-out, it did not adversely affect their natural poise and shapely appearance.

After picking up some wild fruits to allay their hunger, they unleashed their shenfa to rush toward the river bent where Xiang Yushan was waiting per their earlier agreement.

As they run over the top of a hill, a beautiful scenery all around appeared before their eyes, so that they stopped to enjoy it.

White clouds floating slowly in the sky, the rushing water of Yangtze River was seen down below to their left, the water looked so clear and sparkling, the unbroken chain of peaks on the opposite bank reflecting the sunlight, while to their right was a wide-open space. A small village adorned the scenery, with thousands of pathways crisscrossed the plain, lined by thick, bluish-green mountains. In this quiet world, the only sound was the surging water and roaring torrents of the River.

A heroic feeling welled up in Kou Zhong’s heart, like the incessantly surging water of the Great River. Suddenly he shouted at the top of his lungs, “Kou Zhong is here!”

His voice echoed on both sides of the riverbank, it sounded like a low rumble of distant thunder.

Xu Ziling also felt his chest broadened. Since the muddleheaded ruler was killed and they escaped from Jiangdu, this was the first time that he felt this kind of ‘wide sea and open sky, which will enable me to soar high’ feeling.

Kou Zhong slowly breathed out the heavy feeling pressing his breast, letting his blood boiled with heroic emotion and powerful passion. He said word-by-word, “Starting from today, there will be no one under the heavens dare to despise us, two brothers. Whoever dares to do so will ultimately pay a painful price.”

Xu Ziling’s mood was also unusually good; he laughed and said, “It is still too early to say. We were relying on our joint power plus meticulous planning in advance before we were able to get rid of Ren Shaoming. Next time someone is going to deal with us, they would definitely be wary of us [orig. ‘he who comes is surely ill-intentioned, those well-meaning will not come’ (idiom)], so that it will be more difficult for us to deal with them.”

Kou Zhong stretched out and said, “What I fear the most right now is that no one will come as a sacrificial offering for us to temper ourselves. Hey! What are you looking at?”

Xu Ziling turned his head to look at the direction of Jiujiang city. “Didn’t you see the rising dust?” he asked, “It could be the pursuing troops.”

Kou Zhong shrieked and took the lead to dash down the hill.

Book 8 Chapter 4 – Earthly Saber Song Zhi

Kou Zhong looked at the sailboat coming fast at them from the upper reaches of the River. Stopping Xu Ziling, he said, “Don’t you think that boat look a lot like the ship that flew Song Clan’s banner last night? But now the flag has been taken down.”

“Isn’t it very easy if you really want to know?” Xu Ziling replied indifferently. Suddenly he leaped onto a big rock by the beach. Applying his qi, he called out, “May I ask if Miss Song is onboard?” His voice was carried by the wind toward the approaching sailboat.

Kou Zhong was stunned. He looked up at Xu Ziling, who was perched high on the rock, in disbelief. Completely at a loss, he asked, “Aren’t you in strong opposition of me getting close to Song Yuzhi? Why today you are completely changed from your normal self? This kind of proactive action is really shocking.”

Xu Ziling let out a sincere and touching smile; he slyly said, “Basically you already knew that it was the same boat as last night, yet you put an act by asking me. No matter what I say, you will always find a way to make me do what you want me to do. So I might as well help you accomplish your aim. Aren’t I a good enough brother for you?”

Kou Zhong roared in laughter, “You are funny enough for sure, you got me there. Ha! You’ll make me die of laughing!”

One after another the two boys leaped onto the deck. Song Yuzhi looked at them coldly, without showing any emotion she said, “Turn around, return to port!”

Song Shuang, who was standing behind her, quickly transmitted the order. The sailors got busy immediately.

Kou Zhong bowed to salute and said, "Miss Song is going back and forth on the Great River, I wonder if it was for us, two brothers?"

Song Yuzhi stared at him coldly for quite a while. Suddenly she shook her head and sighed, "How did you do it?" she asked.

Xu Ziling replied nonchalantly, "Miss' news is really fast and abundant."

Upset, Song Yuzhi said, "Only the deaf and the blind would not know about it. Ren Shaoming's death has turned the entire Jiujiang region into chaos, nobody is able to put it under control. Tieqi Hui is expressing their rage toward the Wulin characters inside the city, a lot of people have died. I heard that Chu Army is also in conflict with Tieqi Hui."

Listening to her, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other in dismay, thinking in their heart that they had implicated a lot of people.

Noticing that her boat has successfully turned around and was now sailing against the stream, Song Yuzhi softened. "How about two Gongzi giving me a face by coming inside for some refreshment, and food and drink?"

The two boys entered a small cabin at the end of a narrow gangway where a round table with more than a dozen chairs arranged around it. Immediately they were stunned.

Seven or eight people were crammed along the wall opposite the cabin door. Only one of them sat, steady and stable; obviously he was the one with the highest status.

The man looked to be around forty years of age, slim and tall, his skin was as white as snow, on his thin and narrow face was a pair of enigmatic, yet intelligent eyes. Along with a passionate and sensitive mouth with long, five-strand beard, and his scholarly attire, he was a picture of an elegant and

handsome man, like Zhuge Wuhou[1] descended to the world of the immortals.

Seeing the two boys entered, his entire body rose, and he said with a smile, “Zaixia Song Zhi, welcoming two Gongzi’s honorable selves who grace us with your presence. Please sit down!”

Unexpectedly he was the second-in-command of the Song Clan, the ‘Earthly Saber’ Song Zhi!

After regaining his composure, Kou Zhong saluted and said with a laugh, “Turns out Song Er Ye [second master] has come.”

Song Zhi cheerfully said, “Sit down first, we’ll chat later.”

Only after Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were seated properly did Song Zhi also sit down. The other martial art masters of the Song Clan stood behind Song Zhi’s chair. Only Song Yuzhi and Song Shuang stood on the two boys’ side.

Xu Ziling felt awkward, “Why don’t Miss Song and the others sit down?” he asked.

Calmly Song Zhi laughed and said, “Just let Laofu [old man, referring to self] sit on their behalf! This time the two Gongzi were able to strike and kill Ren Shaoming under the heavy siege of Tieqi Hui’s as-numerous-as-the-cloud martial art masters, skillfully executed brilliant scheme, in battle of wits and battle of strength, inevitably the news about this battle exploded all over the world. However, with increasing fame comes increasing trouble. I was wondering what plan do the two Gongzi have for the future?”

Noticing that Song Zhi was well-aware of the situation as if he had personally witnessed it, the two boys’ heart shivered in fear, knowing that he must have an informant planted within the Tieqi Hui.

Song Zhi went on, “There is one thing that I am not sure two gentlemen are aware of. Ren Shaoming was actually Tiele’s ‘Big Bandit’ Qu Ao’s son. This man is going on the rampage along western frontier, no one is able to put him under

control. Speaking about prestige, he is second only to Wuzun [martial art venerable] Bi Xuan. But in terms of cruelty and killing skill, Bi Xuan lags far behind him.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly astonished.

Qu Ao’s name, they overheard it when they eavesdropped Song Yuzhi and Shen Luoyan’s dialog the other day. Song Yuzhi was emphasizing to Shen Luoyan that Qu Ao was colluding with Du Fuwei to deal with Li Mi. Unexpectedly he and Ren Shaoming had a father and son relationship.

However, they were not afraid at all.

Shrugging his shoulders, Kou Zhong said, “A plan, we do not have any. But it is quite possible that Song Er Ye has never heard that we, two brothers, are planning to haul a batch of salt to the salt-deficient Guanzhong, hoping to earn his mother’s large profit.”

Hearing Kou Zhong spoke vulgar words, although on the surface Song Yuzhi was frowning deeply, a feeling of intimacy and hard to describe thrill welled up in her fragrant heart.

Song Zhi was silent for half a day. Suddenly he threw his head back and let out a long laughter. Looking out the window, he stared at the riverbank resplendent under the bright sunlight. He was quiet for quite a while with just a smile on his face. Finally his gaze returned to the two boys as he said with a hoarse laughter, “Am I right in saying that two Gongzi do not consider me as a friend?”

Song Yuzhi, who was standing behind Kou Zhong, said in disdain, “I already said that this man does not speak half a word of truth!”

Rather surprised, Song Zhi cast a glance toward his niece before turning to the two boys and spoke in earnestness, “If that is indeed the two Gongzi’s only aspiration, you would not have killed Ren Shaoming, and would not have asked us to support Gui Xiliang to be the Bangzhu as the condition to our business deal. Is Laofu wrong?”

As if nothing had happened, Kou Zhong calmly said, "How could Song Er Ye be wrong? But I was telling you the truth."

Xu Ziling added, "This time we are transporting salt to Guanzhong is indeed our, two brothers' cherish desire to temper ourselves."

A mysterious smile appeared on Song Zhi's face. "The 'Duke Yang Treasure' is in Guanzhong, isn't it?" he said lightly.

The two boys' heart shivered even more. This Song Zhi's reputation as the Song Clan's 'wisdom sack' was indeed well deserved; unexpectedly he managed to deduce the fact with seventy, eighty-percent accuracy. Kou Zhong sighed and said, "Song Er Ye is indeed formidable!"

Song Zhi said indifferently, "Why not do a bit bigger business? Might as well do it."

Kou Zhong was puzzled, "How can we do a bit bigger business?"

Song Zhi smiled and said, "No matter how much salt the two Gongzi want, we can supply it."

After exchanging glances with Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong shook his head and said, "One thing we, two brothers, are most afraid of is precisely falling into someone else's control."

"It's not that two gentlemen are afraid to fall into someone else's control," Song Zhi cut him off, "Rather, you are unwilling to bow down to anybody. If I, Song Zhi, cannot see this point, I would not have spoken these words today."

Song Yuzhi joined in, "Er Shu [second uncle]! Yuzhi already said that they don't know the immensity of heaven and earth!"

Song Zhi laughed and said, "Yuzhi should not say anything emotional; anybody who could kill Ren Shaoming is qualified to speak like Kou Xiaoxiong and Xu Xiaoxiong."

After fixing his eyes on Kou Zhong for quite some time, he stroked his beard and said with a smile, "Currently, with the death of Ren Shaoming, the situation in the south is reversed. Looking at all the warlords vying for supremacy, only Lin Shihong and Xiao Xian are more or less able to vie with our Song Family. If the two gentlemen have the aspiration to obtain the world, why not talk about the possibility of cooperation with each other?"

A fantastic feeling rose up in Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's heart, realizing that they were highly regarded after killing Ren Shaoming. Otherwise, how could they stand on equal footing with this second-in-command of the Song Clan? Let alone having high-level talk about cooperation with him.

After short contemplation, Kou Zhong nodded and said, "Only under one condition will we be able to really work together with a common purpose: your precious Clan's Clan Master must be willing to betroth Miss Yuzhi to me, Kou Zhong."

All the martial art masters of the Song Clan, who all long stayed silent, were stunned. Song Yuzhi even exclaimed, "Ah!" with her tender voice. Red clouds appeared on her jade cheeks, whether from happiness or anger, it was hard to distinguish.

Only Song Zhi remained as calm and cool-headed as ever. After staring at Kou Zhong for quite a while, he laughed involuntarily and said, "Kou Xiaoxiong's ambition is indeed not low, but you are simply counting your chicken before they are hatched."

Xu Ziling remained unruffled. Nobody was able to see his innermost thoughts.

Kou Zhong felt no qualms; maintaining a straight face he said craftily, "The dowry is the 'Duke Yang Treasure'."

Song Yuzhi almost wanted to pinch Kou Zhong dead on the spot. "No!" she screamed, "I am not going to marry him!"

Song Shuang, who doted on Song Yuzhi the most, could not refrain from

saying, “Yuzhi is already engaged!”

Song Zhi raised his hand to stop the two from speaking further. He looked at Kou Zhong, and then he looked at the ever-enigmatic Xu Ziling. Finally he nodded and said, “Kou Xiaoxiong is definitely a worthy candidate to vie other the world. If our Song Clan missed this opportunity, my humble [elder] brother will definitely blame me.”

Severely shaken, Song Yuzhi exclaimed, “Er Shu!”

Song Zhi smiled at her and said, “The ‘Duke Yang Treasure’ is still an exceedingly remote possibility. Besides, this matter will not happen unless we receive your father’s nods. Yuzhi, why panic?”

Kou Zhong was delighted, “Miss Song, please set your mind at ease,” he said, “If when the day comes you say ‘No’, how could I, Kou Zhong, shamelessly force you?”

Everybody nodded their heads in approval; they all admired Kou Zhong’s broad-mindedness and elegance.

Only Song Yuzhi tightly pursed her lips, but she did not speak a single word of opposition either.

Song Zhi laughed and said, “This matter has thus been more or less decided. Would two Xiaoxiong require our assistance?”

Kou Zhong shook his head to decline. Lowering his voice, he said, “Er Ye ought to give forming an alliance with Xiao Xian a careful thought. That Lin Shihong is being pressed by the enemy front and back; it’s hard for him to accomplish anything.”

None of the people from Song Clan’s side was not emotionally moved.

[1] Zhuge Wuhou – Marquis of Wu, is the nobility title of Zhuge Liang, a famous character from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

Song Zhi's eyes were gleaming with lightning flashes. It was quite a moment later that he said, "All along we and Baling Bang are like river water that does not interfere with well water, yet there is no friendly relationship either, so ..."

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Leave it to us, two brothers, to act as a go-between [orig. to thread a needle]. And now let us return to Baling. Whatever Xiao Dangjia thinks, we will let Er Ye know."

Song Zhi chuckled and said, "Talking with two Xiaoxiong, you act quick and you talk quick, it is indeed very stirring. We'd better have Yuzhi come with you to take a look what Xiao Dangjia has in mind."

"Er Shu!" Song Yuzhi protested.

Song Zhi smiled and said, "This is an important matter, Yuzhi is the most suitable candidate, it will also show our Song Family's sincerity."

Song Yuzhi gave Kou Zhong a hard stare for a moment before she finally sighed and said, "Yuzhi accept the order!"

The three people disembarked the ship and hurried toward the appointed place where Xiang Yushan's ship has dropped anchor.

Song Yuzhi deliberately fell behind, she did not want to walk alongside the two boys.

Half a sichen later, the two Jukun Bang ships appeared on the hillside below. Kou Zhong stopped abruptly, so that Song Yuzhi nearly bumped onto his broad back. However, Xu Ziling did not stop at all, he continued rushing down.

Behind Kou Zhong, Song Yuzhi knitted her brows. "Why are you stopping?" she

asked.

Kou Zhong kept his gaze downward; he replied in heavy voice, "Do you see that red and white flag hanging on the mast? That means there are enemies onboard, but the people on the ship are still all right."

Song Yuzhi looked down below and saw the masts with the fluttering red and white flag towering over the wooded area by the riverbank. Her countenance changed, "Then why did you let Xu Ziling brave the danger alone?"

Kou Zhong smiled and said, "First of all, Xiao Ling is highly capable of dealing with any danger, alone. Secondly, people on our side still have the freedom to move freely, hence it can clearly be seen that the situation is not completely dire."

Annoyed, Song Yuzhi said, "But we are dilly-dallying here, aren't we wasting our time?"

Without turning around, Kou Zhong giggled and said, "As long as Miss Song is here with me, there is no problem of wasting time."

Song Yuzhi's pretty face blushed slightly. "Kou Zhong," she said fiercely, "Just remember that even if Die and Er Shu say yes, I, Song Yuzhi, will never marry you. You, this guy, basically don't have the least bit of sincerity."

Kou Zhong replied indifferently, "Supposing I do have sincerity, would Miss change your mind?"

Song Yuzhi kept a straight expression on her pretty face, as if she did not see him at all. Putting an air of a free spirit, she spoke casually, "Expecting you to have sincerity is like expecting the sun to rise in the west!"

This moment Kou Zhong heard Xu Ziling issuing three birdcalls in succession. "Come!" he said, "Miss Song is destined to always follow me, the Ol' Kou."

Without waiting for her response, he dashed downhill.

On the deck of the ship, Xiang Yushan, Yun Yuzhen, Bu Tianzhi, Chen Laomou and the others were standing on one side, whereas on the other side stood the most outstanding martial art master of Tujue's younger generation, Ba Fenghan, and the newly appointed master of Dongming Pai, the Dongming Princess Shan Wanjing.

Looking at both sides' demeanor, apparently they had not fought yet.

Although Ba and Shan, two people's martial art skill surpassed those of Xiang Yushan and the others, but they were heavily outnumbered by Xiang Yushan's side, so that achieving victory would not be easy.

Leading Song Yuzhi along, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling leaped onto the deck and joined Xiang Yushan's side. Immediately Ba Fenghan and Shan Wanjing were put into the weaker side, yet the two did not show the least bit of disturbed look.

When he saw the unique charm of Song Yuzhi, Ba Fenghan's eye lit up. He said with a laugh, "This Miss is ..."

Shan Wanjing cut him off, "Turns out Song Family's Miss Yuzhi. I wonder why you came back with these two little thieves."

Obviously Song Yuzhi was acquainted with Shan Wanjing; she replied indifferently, "If Princess wants to fight with these two little ... hey! Two little kids, please don't involve Yuzhi. Our Song family is not going to meddle in your affairs."

Xiang Yushan, Yun Yuzhen, and the others were greatly perplexed, they could not figure out Song Yuzhi's relation with the two boys.

It was unclear whether she was driven by jealousy, but Yun Yuzhen deliberately came close to Kou Zhong, affectionately put her mouth by his ear and said, "Unexpectedly you guys really killed Ren Shaoming; a lot of people can't believe it! This illicit couple came here half a sichen earlier than you did, they insist on waiting for you here."

Kou Zhong nodded. He turned to Ba Fenghan and laughed aloud, “How’s Ba Xiong’s martial art skill compared to Ren Shaoming?” he asked.

Letting out an indifferent laugh, Ba Fenghan replied, “We have not fought each other, how would I know who’s superior who’s inferior? This time I came here to wait respectfully for the two gentlemen’s honored selves, it is precisely to get the answer to the question of who’s superior who’s inferior.”

It was only now did Song Yuzhi find out that that man was Ba Fenghan; she could not help looking at him with interest, sizing him up. She felt that both in terms of outward appearance and poise, he was not inferior to Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling. Not only his sharp features were not obnoxious, it even added an unusually appealing charm.

Xu Ziling knitted his brows and said, “Ba Xiong and us have never had any real enmity, why would you readily want to fight a life and death battle? But we are not afraid of Ba Xiong, not at all. We merely have deep respect out of believe that people of talent appreciate one another!”

Ba Fenghan did not expect Xu Ziling to speak so appropriately. He was stunned for half a day before finally spoke with a wry smile, “Although I do not have any personal enmity against Kou Xiong and Xu Xiong, it’s a pity that two of Ol’ Ba’s close female friends are determined to kill two gentlemen. How could Ol’ Ba simply watch with folded arms?”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, “If Ba Xiong can really watch with folded arms, the problem will be easily solved [orig. the bamboo splits as soon as it meets the knife’s edge]. You don’t believe me? Ha! Let me conduct an experiment and have you see it. Xiao Ling! Get out and stand over here, let the Princess kill you! By no means, do not hit back!”

Shan Wanjing, who all along has been silent, suddenly became agitated. “Kou Zhong,” she angrily shouted, “Get out and roll over here to die first, let’s see if I dare to kill you or not.”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, did you see that? If Princess can really make her move to kill Xiao Ling, why would she want me,

Zhong Shao, to take his place?”

‘Qiang!’

Shan Wanjing drew her sword, took two steps forward, and then with face as cold as ice she pointed the tip of the sword toward the two boys and said, “Get out, both of you. To kill you, two little thieves, I do not need any help.”

Xiang Yushan spoke up respectfully, “Princess, please think thrice. Once someone shed blood, the enmity that ensues will be difficult to resolve, resulting in endless entanglement.”

Shan Wanjing replied coldly, “This is a matter between me and these two; it would be best if outsiders not interfere.”

Laughing tenderly, Yun Yuzhen said, “Is Ba Fenghan considered an outsider?”

Resolute and decisive [orig. chop the nail and slice the iron], Shan Wanjing said, “He can’t interfere either.”

Ba Fenghan sat casually on the ship’s railings; unruffled, he said, “I have something I’d like to say: if it is a fair, one-on-one fight, the Ol’ Ba will not interfere.”

With a forced laughter Kou Zhong said, “Princess is fully aware that we are unwilling to harm you; this is extremely unfair! Xiao Ling! You go first!”

Xu Ziling strode forward. He stopped about half a zhang in front of Shan Wanjing, and calmly said, “Princess, please bestow instructions!”

Shan Wanjing’s beautiful eyes exuded an incomparably complicated expression as she stared at Xu Ziling for a moment. And then, as if she finally made up her mind, suddenly her lily-white hand started to move; in an instant it turned into millions of light and shadow, sword qi permeated the air, blanketing Xu Xiling completely in the inside.

Everybody already knew that her swordsmanship was superb, but no one had ever expected that it would be this astonishing.

Xu Ziling watched as the tip of her sword turned into a dot of cold star and shot into his chest, yet unexpectedly he did not respond at all.

Kou Zhong raised his eyebrows; his eyes glinted sharply. He did not look at Xu Ziling at all; rather, he was staring viciously at Shan Wanjing's serene yet terrifying eyes.

He was the only one who understood that Xu Ziling was using his life as a gambling stake in an attempt to resolve this hopelessly muddled enmity.

Ba Fenghan also revealed an astonished look on his face. His hand pressed on the saber's hilt; but it was unclear whether he was thinking of preventing this matter from happening, or he wanted to stop Kou Zhong and the other spectators from interfering.

Xiang Yushan, Yun Yuzhen, Bu Tianzhi, Song Yuzhi and the others had their countenances changed at the same time, but it all happened so fast that they did not even have time to scream. The tip of Shan Wanjing's sword was already only a cun away from the pit of Xu Ziling's stomach.

Kou Zhong leaned forward slightly, his eyes shone with lightning flashes. As soon as Shan Wanjing's sword penetrated Xu Ziling's chest for real, he would disregard everything to charge toward Shan Wanjing.

Ba Fenghan's eyes were also focused on Kou Zhong, he was also prepared to make his move.

The sword qi was pressing on Xu Ziling's tattered garment that it was fluttering wildly backward, but he still stood there upright and unafraid; his pair of tiger eyes was flickering with divine and unfathomable radiance, his countenance was as calm as the water in an ancient well without any ripple on it, without the slightest care of this sword, which was about to decide his life and death. Even his eyebrows did not wrinkle at all.

Right this instant between life and death, Shan Wanjing's eyes finally appeared to change. It was a subtle expression of distress mixed with anger. Sword qi suddenly subsided, the sword tip skewed three cun upward. The blade stabbed Xu Ziling's flank.

Xu Ziling clearly felt the sword blade reached his bone. But then Shan Wanjing swiftly pulled her sword and retreated.

Blood spurted out wildly, but Xu Ziling was still as steady as the mountain, he was not swayed at all.

Up to this point nobody made any noise yet, the more than a hundred people onboard two ships appeared to have turned into mutes.

Kou Zhong breathed a sigh of relief. Ba Fenghan's gaze returned to Xu Ziling. An admiring glance flashed through his eyes, followed vicious murderous aura, but it also quickly disappeared.

Shan Wanjing retreated almost to the end of the bow. She looked down on her sword stained with Xu Ziling's blood, her face turned ashen as she spoke with a trembling voice, "Xu Ziling! Why didn't you fight back?"

Taking a deep breath, Xu Ziling transmitted his qi to stop the blood flow from his wound. He spoke gently, "Has Princess' anger subsided somewhat?"

Shan Wanjing's breasts went up and down rapidly. Looking up, she met Xu Ziling's eyes as she shook her head slowly and said, "My anger will never subside, but the matter of stolen account book can be dropped at this point."

Soaring high into the air, she made a somersault and disappeared into the forest by the riverbank. The most surprising thing was that she did not call Ba Fenghan to go together with her.

Now everybody turned their eyes toward a little awkward Ba Fenghan.

Having just recovered from the shock, Yun Yuzhen called out with her tender

voice, “Princess is gone, aren’t Ba Gongzi going to leave as well?”

Ba Fenghan shook his head with a wry smile. “What good is it to chase a woman who has had a change of heart?” he said.

His body flashed, he left as if he suddenly disappeared into thin air.

Book 8 Chapter 5 – Night Talk On Yangtze River

By dusk that day, the warship sailed out of the river bend and entered the Yangtze River, going upstream toward Baling. The cargo ship also sailed along the river going north.

When Kou Zhong pushed the door and entered into Xu Ziling's cabin, the latter was regulating his qi and his breathing. Other than the paleness due to slight loss of blood earlier, he did not look like someone who had just been stabbed by a sword.

The two boys sat in the two chairs by the window.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "Your guts are really not small. At that time I was so afraid that she could not stop her hand and hence take your life for real. Whenever I thought about it I am still having cold sweats."

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "It was the only way to resolve the enmity; otherwise, how would she be willing to step back? If we fought, no matter who got injured, the result would not be good."

Kou Zhong seemed to be deep in thought. He said slowly, "Ren Shaoming's death not only alters the situation in the south, it also changes our fate, making us the target of a multitude of arrows. Although it has been like that for a while, but now the danger increases several folds."

After pausing for a moment, he continued, "There are two people that we

must guard against even more so than before. Can you guess which two I am talking about?”

Xu Ziling mused, “Is one of them Ba Fenghan? When Shan Wanjing let me off, I felt his murderous intention toward me. And the other one must be Tiele’s Big Bandit Qu Ao?”

“If it were Qu Ao, I don’t need you to guess,” Kou Zhong replied, “I was thinking about Yang Xuyan. He wanted to assassinate Xiang kid; obviously it was for Lin Shihong and Ren Shaoming’s sake. Now that we killed Ren Shaoming instead, it would be really strange if he did not come looking for us to create trouble.”

Xu Ziling turned his gaze toward the window, to the riverbank under the bright moonlight. He sighed, and then slowly shook his head, as if he wanted to throw away all the burden of his heart.

Kou Zhong tried to sound him out, “Even Ba Fenghan seemed to think that that wicked Princess has a great interest toward you.”

Xu Ziling absent-mindedly said, “So what if she is interested. Dongming Pai has the strangest rule; Princess has already had prince consort early on. More importantly, I basically don’t want to get married and have children. I just want to spend my days living a free and easy life. I am not like you with your lofty aspiration of saving the world or helping common people.”

Kou Zhong was upset, “You are making fun of me,” he said.

“I’m just speaking the truth,” Xu Ziling replied seriously, “In terms of strategy, it would really help your cause if you could marry Song Yuzhi.”

Kou Zhong looked up at the cabin’s ceiling, there was a flash of longing look in his eyes, which was quickly replaced by a layer of blank expression. He spoke dreamily, “Can’t say for sure which part of her attracts me most, but I can’t ever think of her like I do Li Xiuning, which keeps winding around in my dreams and pulling away my soul, that keeps me awake at night feeling sad, giving me both pain and pleasure. Ay! Is it because I learned my lesson with Li Xiuning that I no

longer have the guts to rush into love relationship?”

Xu Ziling emphatically shook his head and said with a smile, “Li Xiuning represents a key turning point in your, Zhong Shao’s life. From that moment on, your desire for the fine things of the world was transferred to the great undertaking. Therefore, before you can figure out whether you love Song Yuzhi or not, you already decided to marry her. Because from your point of view, no feeling is more important than contending for the world. Hence anything that you have your eyes on, you only view it from this aspect. Am I wrong?”

Kou Zhong was stunned, “In that case, have I lost the ability to love a woman deeply?” he asked.

Xu Ziling sympathetically said, “This is called if you want to gain something you must lose something. A choice is a choice; since you chose one thing, naturally you lost something else.”

Grabbing his head, Kou Zhong lamented, “Can’t I choose two things at once? Can’t I find balance?”

Upset, Xu Ziling said, “Supposing right this moment Li Xiuning came to you and told you that she finally realized that the one she loved was you, and asking you to grow old together with her, would you be willing to give up Song Yuzhi?”

Kou Zhong was immediately dumbstruck and was unable to reply.

This moment Yun Yuzhen pushed the door and walked in; smiling brightly, she asked the two boys, “What are gentlemen, great heroes talking about? May I join you?”

Kou Zhong patted his thigh and said with a laugh, “Beautiful Shifu, are you interested in sitting on the most comfortable seat in the world?”

With ten thousand flirtatious expressions Yun Yuzhen glowered at him and sat on the bed. Turning to Xu Ziling, she said, “Are you still in pain? That Princess seemed to treat you with ...” Seeing Kou Zhong kept signaling her with his hand,

Yun Yuzhen quickly corrected herself, “Ay! I almost forget to tell you the latest news: the Jade Annulus of He Clan has reappeared!”

Kou Zhong was visibly shaken, “Could you tell me the details?”

Yun Yuzhen said, “The widely spread rumor in Jianghu is that just before he left for Luoyang, while he was still at Duanwu, Ning Daoqi had given the Jade Annulus of He Clan to Shi Feixuan.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were puzzled. “So the Jade Annulus of He Clan is in Ning Daoqi’s hand?” Xu Ziling asked in bewilderment.

Kou Zhong’s interest was in something else, “Who is Shi Feixuan?” he asked, “From the name, she should be a woman?”

Seeing the two boys’ interest, Yun Yuzhen was delighted, “The rumor is highly doubtful,” she said, “First of all, both parties can’t possibly leak this kind of information, which would only bring endless trouble for them. Plus whoever started the rumor must have very strong imagination and have deep understanding of unpredictable human psyche.”

Knitting his brows, Kou Zhong said, “You haven’t answered my question: who is Shi Feixuan?”

Yun Yuzhen cast him a sideways glance and said, “So you are very interested because the person involved was a woman?”

Kou Zhong burst out laughing, “My Beautiful Shifu, even if you said that Ning Daoqi was giving the Jade Annulus of He Clan to someone called Kou Laoniu [lit. old cow], I would be very interested in this Kou Laoniu. This is called I am interested in the people involved, not the gender.”

With an enchanting smile Yun Yuzhen said, “Just consider Shifu has blamed you wrongly, all right? Have you guys heard about Ci Hang Jing Zhai? She and Yin Hui Pai are very similar [see Book 5 Chapter 12 for first mention of these two organizations], they both enjoy supreme status, but both are equally mysterious.

The difference is that one is upright the other is heretical!”

Xu Ziling’s tiger-eyes were flashing; he said slowly, “That Shi Feixuan is the representative of Ci Hang Jing Zhai in the decisive battle against Yin Gui Pai.”

Yun Yuzhen nodded and said, “Turns out you guys already know about these two upright and heretical major sects. This time you killed Ren Shaoming, Yin Gui Pai will definitely not let you off.”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, “If there was no such enemy like Yin Gui Pai, we will never reach martial art master level like Ning Daoqi.”

Yun Yuzhen stared blankly at him for half a day. She could not help asking, “Do you want to be the emperor, or you want to be a genuine Wulin expert?”

Xu Ziling replied indifferently, “Beautiful Shifu talked about these two things as if it is as effortless as being a salt merchant or a chef. To Zhong Shao, these two objectives are ‘the fish and the bear’s paw, you can’t have both at the same time’, both desires could be obtained quickly and later.”

Yun Yuzhen was pleased, “Xiao Ling, it has been a long while since you called me ‘Beautiful Shifu’! What wind has been blowing today?”

Xu Ziling sighed and said, “Tonight, whether Beautiful Shifu’s scowling or laughing, there is a little bit of sincerity that was not there before, so that my heart is touched, remembering those beautiful days when we first met.”

Yun Yuzhen’s charming body trembled slightly; she looked at Xu Ziling, and then gazed at Kou Zhong. Hanging her small head down, she said softly, “When I knew you, you were urchins who have not grown up. Fast forward to today, you have killed a formidable figure who had dominated the south for more than ten years, I suddenly realized that you have finally matured into Wulin experts who assume personal responsibility.”

After a moment of pause she sighed and went on, “Although I have schemed against you, the fact is that at that time the pain of contradiction in my heart

was killing me. I don't know why, but I always felt you and I are kindred spirits; I am willing to trust you, to work for you. I don't trust Xiao Dangjia too much."

The last sentence was spoken with a voice as tiny as a mosquito.

Kou Zhong's eyes were gleaming with mysterious glint; he said in low voice, "If Beautiful Shifu is willing to help me, I guarantee I will treat you right."

Assuming a bit of helpless attitude Yun Yuzhen said, "I hope you won't one day forget that promise. Xiao Ling is my witness."

Xu Ziling could only smile wryly.

Kou Zhong was progressively accomplishing his plan to build up his power and prestige. And successful mission to kill Ren Shaoming was the most important juncture. Otherwise, how could such a figure like Yun Yuzhen, a Gang Leader rich with Jianghu experience, express allegiance to him? Moreover, it appeared more complicated because it involved the man-woman attraction between them. Supposing in the future Kou Zhong let Yun Yuzhen down, what could Xu Ziling do?

Kou Zhong showed an engaging smile toward Yun Yuzhen as he said tenderly, "Beautiful Shifu may be rest assured! I understand revering master is a serious thing. Right! What kind of person is Shi Feixuan? How's her martial art skill?"

Enchanted by the charm of his smile, Yun Yuzhen blissfully said, "Shi Feixuan is just like Shi Qingxuan [Translator's note: not the same 'shi' and 'xuan' characters]; they are both shrouded in mystery. The number of people who had seen them is really not many, but those who have, all of them are awed by her extraordinarily refined personality traits. She appears to represent the most beautiful thing of the world, so that people adore her, without ever arousing lust in their hearts. Moreover, she brings forth a feeling of inferiority in both men and women who are in her presence."

Listening to her, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling could only stare blankly; unexpectedly there was a character like her in the world.

“Isn’t she a [Buddhist] Nun?” Xu Ziling was puzzled, “How come she is using secular [orig. ‘sujia’, original home of a monk/nun] name and surname?”

“No one knows,” Yun Yuzhen replied, “But although she grew a cloud of hair and used secular family name, her conduct and her way of living is no different from someone who has left home [to become Buddhist monk/nun]. She lives an ascetic, plain and simple life.”

Highly interested, Kou Zhong asked, “What kind of weapon does she use?”

Yun Yuzhen shook her head and replied, “On the surface she is not carrying any weapon, and no one has ever heard she fought with anybody. It is said that whoever came across her was overwhelmed with respect and adoration; how could they have any heart to massacre her?”

“How did Shifu know so clearly?” Kou Zhong asked in astonishment, “Listening to your tone, you have not seen her either, have you?”

Yun Yuzhen’s pretty eyes radiated sadness and hurt; she hung her head down dejectedly and said, “It was Hou Xibai who told me just before we parted, he is one of several people that Shi Feixuan look up to; he had once roamed Sanxia [three gorges of Yangtze River: Qutang, Wuxia and Xiling] with her, talking of the past and discussing the present. Ay!”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged some glances. They both felt Yun Yuzhen’s regret and misery from parting with Hou Xibai.

Last time, when they mentioned Hou Xibai, she refused to answer; this time she spoke out calmly, apparently she was expressing her true feelings toward Kou Zhong, not wanting to arouse misunderstanding in the future.

By throwing herself toward Kou Zhong, quite possibly she wanted to use him to forget her sorrow with Hou Xibai.

Frowning, Xu Ziling said, “Could it be that in her presence, Hou Xibai did not have any feeling of inferiority?”

A tender feeling flashed through Yun Yuzhen's beautiful eyes as she said softly, "He is an outstanding person, so free and easy. His literary talent distinguished and accomplished, his insights profound; perhaps only he fits to be friend with Shi Feixuan."

The two boys looked at each other in astonishment; it was only then did they understand Hou Xibai's position in Yun Yuzhen's heart. Although they had separated, she was still unable to extricate herself from this entanglement of the heart.

"Did Hou Xibai try to pursue Shi Feixuan?" Xu Ziling asked, "Who is he, actually? What is his background?"

"He is an enigmatic figure," Yun Yuzhen replied, "No one knows his background or history, he seems to have unlimited the money in his purse, he is always able to visit any world famous courtesans anywhere. Himself is a proficient guqin player, and an adept composer. Because he is multi-talented, he is known as the 'Passionate Prince'. It was because of my curiosity that I intentionally went to a pleasure house that Yushan has just opened to get to know him; who would have thought ... ay ... I don't want to talk about it."

"Let's not talk about this aspect then," Kou Zhong indifferently remarked, "How's his martial art skill? What kind of weapon does he use?"

Yun Yuzhen replied, "His martial art skill can only be described as deep and immeasurable. Since his debut less than five years ago, the number of flower-picking lascivious thieves who died under his hands is already over one hundred. The weapon he uses is a large folding fan with pictures of beautiful women on it, which he painted with his own hand. Each time he met a woman he admired, his folding fan would have one more portrait of that beautiful woman."

Kou Zhong was amazed, "This kid can really be considered romantic," he said.

Yun Yuzhen sighed. She said in anguish, "Can we not talk about him anymore?"

There was a knock on the door.

“Who is it?” Kou Zhong asked.

Song Yuzhi’s voice came from the other side of the door, “Is Xu Gongzi free? I’d like to talk to him a little bit.”

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong looked at each other in shock.

What could she possibly want that she wanted to talk privately with Xu Ziling?

Xu Ziling followed behind Song Yuzhi. Stepping out of the cabin, the river breeze assaulted their faces, rousing his spirit.

When Jukun Bang people who were on duty on the deck saw him, they all busily greeted ‘Xu Ye’ [master], in a very respectful manner. Perhaps it was due to his rising prestige from killing Ren Shaoming.

Song Yuzhi walked in large strides toward the stern. Although her gait was not as graceful as Shen Luoyan’s or Yun Yuzhen’s, there was a delightful and refreshing feeling that invigorated those who saw her.

When she stopped at the stern, Xu Ziling also stopped by her side, but he kept silent.

Song Yuzhi let her long hair blown by the wind. With her hands resting on the railings, she sighed gloomily and said, “You don’t like to talk, do you? Or you simply don’t want to talk to me? You don’t even ask me why I risk others’ suspicion by talking with you out here.”

Xu Ziling kept his gaze on the vast river under the bright moonlight. Moored on the left bank in the distance were a dozen or so fishing boats, with a dim lantern light emanated from each one of them. When he thought about how each lantern light represented a warm home, his heart was overwhelmed with emotion.

Since they were little until now they were grown up, they always lacked a real

home, and quite possibly they would never have one. So he was used to the feeling of not having a home.

Taking a deep breath of the river breeze, Xu Ziling spoke indifferently, “Miss Song, please speak freely.”

Song Yuzhi turned her pretty face to look at him. She smiled and said, “How could you and Kou Zhong become friends that are closer than brothers? Your personality is so different from each other.”

Xu Ziling met her gaze. Shrugging his shoulders, he replied, “This is called one wishes to give a beating, the other is willing to take a beating. Or perhaps when we were small we were a lot simpler, hence it did not take long to get used to and accept each other.”

Song Yuzhi’s eyes brightened like the continuously twinkling stars in the sky, while her face had a faraway look as she reminisced her past. She spoke quietly and calmly, “Since childhood I have always been a tomboy, I loved to play with the boys of the family, and always considered myself one of them. My curiosity has always been bigger than the other kids. When I saw a mountain, I would ask what’s beyond the mountain. When I saw a river, I wanted to know where the water is flowing to.”

Xu Ziling let out a hollow laugh, “I would never have guessed,” he said, “Why did Miss Song recall these childhood memories?”

Song Yuzhi knitted her brows and shook her head, “I don’t understand it either,” she said, “Perhaps because I trust you? Whenever I come face-to-face with you, my mood feels particularly relaxed!”

Xu Ziling was stunned, “That is even more unexpected,” he said, “Miss Song and I have just met, why are you willing to put your trust me? Don’t forget that Zhong Shao and I are partners; that’s why people are calling us two kids or two little thieves.”

“Pfft!” Song Yuzhi burst out in laughter, which rarely happened. Casting a sidelong glance toward him, she said, “Your craftiness is actually not the least bit

inferior to Kou Zhong, it's just that you are always collected and quiet, so that others are not aware of this side of your personality traits. But when I first saw you, I was able to immediately see that you are that kind of person, who is chivalrous by nature, who are always thoughtful toward others; that's why I am willing to put my trust in you, knowing that you won't lie to me."

It was the very first time that Xu Ziling came into contact with her feminine, touching nature. After staring blankly for a moment, he smiled wryly and said, "Can we not talk about that question anymore?"

Looking up to the starry sky, Song Yuzhi slowly said, "Can you guess the question I wanted to ask you?"

Xu Ziling dejectedly nodded; he said with pained expression on his face, "No matter what he did, Kou Zhong is my good brother. If you ask me anything about him, how am I supposed to answer that?"

Song Yuzhi looked down at the sparkling water of the River reflecting the moon and the stars above. She spoke in heavy voice, "I just want to know the truth. Xu Ziling! Take your chivalrous heart out; tell me, Song Yuzhi, truthfully: Kou Zhong is only using me, isn't he?"

Seeing her gleaming eyes, as she stared at him, were shooting deep hatred, Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "Miss Song called me out this late at night to ask me such thing, even if tomorrow I do not tell that kid Kou Zhong that Miss' fragrant heart is in chaos, he will definitely have a way to extract the information from me by 'glancing knock, sideways stroke' [i.e. in roundabout way]."

"So what if he knew?" Song Yuzhi calmly said, "He has already seen long ago that my mind is confused. That was the reason I wanted to know the truth, and you have already told me the answer."

Xu Ziling was silent for quite a while. Finally he said gently, "When did I answer Miss's question?"

Song Yuzhi replied indifferently, "Your mouth did not say it, from the way you are not willing to help him dealing with me, how could Yuzhi not understand

your heart?”

Xu Ziling sighed, “This is terrible,” he said, “That kid will definitely blame me to death!”

Song Yuzhi laughed in spite of herself, “You are really forthcoming!” she said, “Ay, I can’t believe I can still laugh. Isn’t this finding joy in my sorrows?”

Experiencing the gentle and lovely aspect of hers, Xu Ziling’s heart welled up with compassion. He said tenderly, “Kou Zhong may be an astute and formidable person, someone who exploits any benefits he could get; but he is not a bad person at heart, his affection for others is particularly abundant. It’s just that currently he is throwing himself, heart and soul, into his dream of contending for supremacy over the world, so that to him, everything else is secondary! Ay! Does that count as helping him?”

Song Yuzhi’s beautiful eyes rippled with strange gleam. Shaking her head, she said, “No! You are just telling me the truth. Kou Zhong is definitely not a bad guy; on the contrary, he is very promising. In all aspects, he has the quality that I, Song Yuzhi, am looking for in my ideal husband. But I know that he isn’t really committed to me; I was fully aware of it from the start. Ay! Even knowing that, why would I still be willing to come with him to Baling? If I firmly refused, there was nothing that Er Shu could do to me.”

Xu Ziling let out a wry smile and said, “Looks like Miss Song cannot extricate yourself from us, two brothers!”

A faint smile, brimming with confidence, appeared on Song Yuzhi’s face as she said calmly, “Wrong! It’s not that I cannot extricate myself from you guys; rather, I choose to meet this challenge face-to-face. This is my, Song Yuzhi’s, character: I will never cower. This time I came with you, I want to see how many tricks and tools Kou Zhong, that repulsive guy, has.”

Xu Ziling was at a loss, “Since Miss Song already had that thought, plus you are also aware of Kou Zhong’s intention, why did you come to me and ask all these questions?”

A helpless smile appeared on the corners of Song Yuzhi's lips as she spoke wryly but tenderly, "Because I am afraid that for the sake of 'Duke Yang Treasure', Er Shu will persuade Die to sacrifice his own daughter's happiness."

Xu Ziling mused inwardly that that possibility seemed to be great. Song Zhi was an old fox; Kou Zhong schemed against him, he also schemed against Kou Zhong, Song Yuzhi has become their chess piece. He said in heavy voice, "Do you really dislike Kou Zhong?"

Song Yuzhi heaved a deep sigh; she spoke calmly, "If I do not have any good impression toward him, I won't have to be this distressed. If I do not have any feeling toward him, for the benefit of my Clan, I won't refuse him, because I know that under any circumstances, I will not be sad for him. But now I am very scared. Do you understand my feeling?"

Xu Ziling did have deep understanding of her conflicting emotions: it was a hard-to-accept fact on top of a case of love and hate. To a certain degree, Kou Zhong has hurt her.

Song Yuzhi suddenly stretched lazily and smiled, "We are done talking; I feel much better! Xu Ziling, indeed you don't disappoint me. You are not willing to help tyrant Zhou in his oppression [idiom, meaning taking the side of the evildoer], but perhaps you can become my savior. You'll never know."

Giving him a sweet smile, she walked away gracefully.

Xu Ziling was left alone on the stern, lost in thought, pondering upon the deep meaning behind her last sentence.

Xu Ziling tapped Kou Zhong's door lightly. "Xiao Ling?" Kou Zhong responded from the inside, "Come in!"

Knowing Yun Yuzhen was no longer inside, Xu Ziling was relieved. He pushed the door and walked in. Beside himself with joy, Kou Zhong instantly rushed over to wrap his arms around Xu Ziling's shoulders. He laughed and said, "You have no idea how hard it was to wait for you. I wanted to ask, but am afraid your look will give it away. Hee ...! Did she have 'change of affection, shift of love', and now

she fancies you? Ha! One lifetime two brothers. If I really cannot gain her affection, I, Zhong Shao, would yield to you, albeit reluctantly. Afterwards I will find a way to mend this scar in my heart!”

With a wry smile Xu Ziling replied, “Song Yuzhi’s insight is really not bad, she already knew long ago that you, this kid, are just exploiting her, not really in love with her.”

Kou Zhong was stunned. “She is more formidable than what I imagined,” he said, “Looks like in this task my chance of losing is greater than my chance of winning. If I had known this, I might as well ask Beautiful Shifu to stay, then tonight I won’t have to worry about being lonely. Ay! Don’t be so serious, I was just joking to ease the pain in my heart.”

Xu Ziling was displeased, “Basically you don’t have any feeling at all. I am the one who suffers the most here, on one side is my good brother, on the other side is a good girl, and my good brother is going to cheat the good girl’s feeling, and all I could do is to implicitly encourage her so that she would not be cheated.”

Pulling his arms from Xu Ziling’s shoulders, Kou Zhong blurted, “What? Won’t that mean I will lose the love of my life? Wine! Where’s the wine?”

Xu Ziling dejectedly sat down. Shaking his head, he sighed and said, “Stop playacting! If vying for the world means you have to use methods that are hurtful to other people, I am going to leave you!”

Kou Zhong sat down on the other chair; smiling apologetically, he said, “Affection can be fostered, I guarantee that I will not hurt her. But speaking is useless; I hereby proclaim that this matter is finished. Are you satisfied now?”

Xu Ziling was deep in thought for half a day. Finally he slowly said, “The matter between a man and a woman, once started, no one knows for sure how it will end. As your friend and more so, your brother, I can only give you a word of advice: feeling is sharper than the sword, plus it is a two-edged weapon; you have to take care of yourself.”

Kou Zhong solemnly said, “I will take your advice to heart, I will never take a

wrong step in this aspect. Right now I am going to declare to Song Yuzhi that the engagement is cancelled, so she no longer has to worry.”

Finished speaking, he pushed the door and left, leaving Xu Ziling alone in the room, smiling wryly.

Book 8 Chapter 6 – Love And Hate Difficult To Distinguish

Kou Zhong tapped Song Yuzhi's door and asked, "May I come in and speak a couple of sentences?"

"If only two sentences, you certainly may," Song Yuzhi responded.

Kou Zhong sighed before pushing the door and coming in.

The room was dark, only the moonlight from the window coming at an angle illuminated the lantern-less room. It happened to fall onto Song Yuzhi, who was sitting in the only chair in the room, enveloping her in faint golden glow.

The woman's beautiful long jet-black hair was untied, it draped loosely over her fragrant shoulders, her pair of eyes looked like deep and bright precious stones, and they were gazing steadily at him.

Kou Zhong's spirit was greatly shaken. It was the first time that he found out that her feminine side and outward appearance were in no way inferior to Li Xiuning.

Song Yuzhi was a bit impatient, "Didn't you say you were going to speak a couple of sentences? Well, speak up, and then get lost."

With a wry smile Kou Zhong said, "This time I came just to acknowledge my mistake toward Miss Song, and to call off our wedding contract. From now on Kou Zhong will not dare to have any delusions toward Miss Song."

Finished speaking, he turned around to leave.

Song Yuzhi was dumbstruck. “Come back here!” she said.

Kou Zhong’s hand was already on the door’s knob; hearing the call, he stopped on his track. With his back toward her, he said bitterly, “I was wrong; I should have not linked the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’ to Miss’ lifelong happiness together, and treated it as a business deal.”

Song Yuzhi was silent for half a day. Finally she said gently, “Would you sit down so that we can talk, please?”

Kou Zhong shook his head and sighed, “Right now I just want to hide alone and think about this matter quietly. These days all I can think about is how to gain victory in my contending for supremacy against other people, while ignoring other important matters. I really want to reflect upon myself for a while.”

Song Yuzhi raised her pretty eyebrows; somewhat unable to hold back her anger, she said, “You, this kid, listen to this Miss and sit down. If you slip away just like that, I am going to hate you for the rest of my life.”

Like a whirlwind Kou Zhong turned around and asked in amazement, “Don’t you already hate me to the core? Are you telling me you were only pretending?”

Avoiding his sharp and penetrating gaze, Song Yuzhi hung her head down and said, “When you came in just now, why did you, like a fool, look at me like that?”

Kou Zhong walked over to where she sat, kneeling on one knee, he put his right hand on the armrest, and said with a sigh, “Because I suddenly realize that you, Yuzhi, are unexpectedly so touching, so that I could not stop an adoring feeling from growing out in my heart, and thus I reflected upon my own various wrongdoings.”

Song Yuzhi could not avoid smelling his body scent, as they were so close, almost face-to-face with each other, invoking the memory of when she was

pinned down on the snowy ground the other day. Her fragrant heart fluttered, she said, “Can you stand up first and sit down next to me?”

Surprisingly enough Kou Zhong obeyed her; after he was seated nicely, Song Yuzhi continued in low voice, “What do you really want?”

Grabbing his own head, Kou Zhong said, “Which one is Miss Song referring to?”

Song Yuzhi was back to her calm and composed self; she said indifferently, “Naturally the contending for hegemony matter. When all is said and done, why are you doing it?”

Kou Zhong’s eyes immediately lit up. Nodded, he said, “Miss Song is the first person ever who is asking me that question; even Xiao Ling has no interest in knowing.”

After a short pause, he continued, “I was born in the marketplace, from firsthand experience, I deeply feel how when the government completely loses its benevolence and righteousness, common people’s life would be so miserable and painful. Ay! At the beginning I was just wanted to join a militia, which I think would have the most aspiration and prospects. But having encountered such people like Du Fuwei, Li Mi, and the like, none of them do not look for personal benefit, they are also vicious and merciless characters. If they became the emperor, it would definitely not a good thing. Furthermore, since people like them can vie for the world, why can’t I, Kou Zhong do it? What matters most in people is aspiration.”

He sighed before continuing, “Question is, since I want to vie over the world, in no way I can treat benevolence and righteousness as idle chit-chat, to let benevolence and righteousness bind my hands bind my foot in all respects. Therefore, in Miss Song’s eyes, I became someone who, in order to seek my goal, would do anything by hook or by crook. Hey! In reality, I just wanted to make one move and get two gains!”

Song Yuzhi pondered in silence.

Kou Zhong rose up, stretched out his entire body in an exaggerated stretch and said, "I want to go back to my room! Hee .. hee ... after talking it out with you, I feel much more comfortable."

Song Yuzhi spoke gently, "Do you know, Kou Zhong? Die and Er Shu would never let me marry someone with your background. You play games on them, they also play games on you."

"What?" Kou Zhong blurted.

Gracefully Song Yuzhi stood up and walked over to him; staring right into his eyes, she said, "Why didn't you ask me whom Die has betrothed me to? Is it because you feel it's beneath you to ask, or you simply don't care?"

Kou Zhong replied in embarrassment, "Actually, I am bit scared of asking."

Song Yuzhi spoke indifferently, "Even if you asked, I don't think Er Shu would tell you. My future husband is Li Mi's only son, Li Tianfan. The engagement was decided a year ago. As long as Li Mi could capture Luoyang, I would have to marry into the Li family. Do you understand?"

Hearing this, Kou Zhong could only stare blankly with mouth agape, unable to make any sound.

Song Yuzhi reached out with her lily-white hand to stroke his cheek and said with a smile, "Kou Zhong Gongzi, go back to your room and rest! Contending over the word is never a simple matter, but I really wish you would succeed."

Xu Ziling flicked the oil lamp to extinguish it. Pulling the door open, he was just about to step out, while in his heart he was still thinking about Kou Zhong, who could be faking it, but could be really repentance after self-introspection, so that Xu Ziling was worried and delighted at the same time, and his heart was tumultuous, when suddenly a fragrant wind assaulted his face.

Instinctively he backed off to evade it; who would have thought that a tender body was suddenly throwing itself into his bosom, a pair of delicate hands

wrapped itself around his neck, and fragrant lips covered his mouth?

It was only then did Xu Ziling realize what happened. Grabbing the other side's fragrant shoulders, he gently pushed her away a little, and while his handsome face turned beet red, he said, "It's me!"

Yun Yuzhen's charming body was severely shaken; she flung back, her jade cheek was burning like the sunset clouds.

Recovering his confident and easy-going manner, Xu Ziling smiled good-naturedly and said, "Now this is my romantic and beautiful memory." Finished speaking, without waiting for any response he simply turned back into the room.

The ship arrived at Baling. Xiao Xian himself went out of the city gate to welcome them. Accompanying him was the Great General, the Left-field Marshall Zhang Xiu. This man was short, but his head was humongous, his hair unkempt, yet his vision was cool and razor-sharp, as if it could penetrate other people's heart and soul, so that whomever he gazed upon would feel as if he was interrogating him. According to Xiang Yushan's explanation earlier, his martial art skill was superior to the Right-field Marshall Dong Jingzhen, and was barely below Xiao Xian's.

Naturally Susu was part of the welcoming team. Seeing her husband-lord and two brothers returning safe and sound, and had established great merit, she was so happy that she felt her heart was turning upside down.

The ones who really made Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling bursting with joy were Duan Yucheng, Bao Zhifu, Shi Jie and Ma Gui.

These four kids were covered in scars from head to toe; turned out along the way they encountered countless thieves and robbers. But presently they were in very high spirits, apparently because their martial art skills were honed and they made great progress.

Xiao Xian assumed a grateful, 'rely heavily upon' and 'respect for the wise' manner toward the two boys; he was even more respectful toward Song Yuzhi. Naturally he was thinking of the many benefits if he aligned himself with the

Song Clan.

That evening Xiao Xian hosted a banquet to celebrate, during which he praised the two boys without cease.

After the banquet Song Yuzhi remained behind with Xiao Xian for a confidential meeting, while the rest returned to Xiang Yuzhan's General Mansion. En route Susu reminded them of the promise they made that they would accompany her to go on a tour for several days. Since the two boys felt very deep attachment to her, they regarded her as if she was Fu Junchuo, naturally they readily agreed.

Returning to the Mansion, the three sister and brothers chatted freely at the inner courtyard's pavilion, recounted what had happened since they parted. While they were talking and laughing happily, Xiang Yushan came in a hurry.

As soon as he sat down, he said, "Tieqi Hui has been split into three factions: one faction throws themselves to Lin Shihong, one faction adheres to Shen Faxing, the remainders swear an oath to avenge Ren Shaoming. This last faction is headed by the Evil Monk and Amorous Nun."

Susu's flowery face lost its color, "What do we do?" she asked.

Xu Ziling shot Xiang Yushan an unhappy look, blaming him for frightening Susu.

Kou Zhong asked in astonishment, "How did this happen?"

Xiang Yushan smiled apologetically toward Xu Ziling first, and then he comforted Susu before replying, "The ranks within Tieqi Hui are very complex, good and bad people intermingled. Even before, there were different opinions as to whom they ought to align themselves with. Only because everybody was intimidated by Ren Shaoming's power did they appear as 'millions of people all of one mind'. But now that Ren Shaoming's big tree has fallen, the monkeys and apes under the tree are all split up and in pieces."

Kou Zhong was delighted, "This is a good thing for the South," he remarked,

“Tieqi Hui was just a group of organized thieves anyway. If they gained momentum, the first to suffer calamity would be the civilians, the common people.”

Xu Ziling rarely heard him ‘opening his mouth on behalf of the country, closing his mouth on behalf of the people’; he shot a curious glance at him.

Xiang Yushan said, “The news of Ren Shaoming’s death is currently still confined in the South, yet it already stirred up a great deal of chaos. Once it is leaked out to the North, nobody knows what the consequences will be.”

Kou Zhong suddenly asked, “How’s your relationship with Li Mi?”

“In the past,” Xiang Yushan replied, “Because we worked for Yang Guang, it could be said that we were always at odds with Li Mi, our relationship has always been a bad one. However, there has never been any direct conflict; therefore, our relationship is in a very delicate balance. Why do you suddenly ask?”

Right this moment Yun Yuzhen arrived, hence Kou Zhong changed the subject and did not answer Xiang Yushan’s question.

That night Song Yuzhi returned very late, everybody else was asleep already. By daybreak Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling went out for a stroll with Susu, while she was still asleep. By the time they came back, they found out that she had quietly slipped away.

After dinner that evening, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had private discussion with Duan Yucheng, four people, about the route they were going to take to return to the North. Afterwards they returned to their rooms to rest.

Trailing behind Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong proudly said, “Ling Shao! This time I am listening to you! Last night I personally called off my engagement with Song Yuzhi, and this morning she left without even saying goodbye.”

Xu Ziling was amazed, “You don’t seem to have the least bit of displeasure of her leaving?” he asked.

Kou Zhong sat down dejectedly, looking at Xu Ziling, who was standing by the bed, about ready to lie down and sleep; letting out a wry smile, he said, "I would be lying if I said I did not suffer any blow. But with so many things giving me headache right now, how could I have the luxury of worrying over this matter? Girls are like butterflies, if they want to fly away, just let them fly away! Ha! Not only we do not have any luck at the brothel, we don't have any luck with pretty girls either. All beautiful women seem to have ten grievances nine enmities with us."

Xu Ziling was raising the mosquito curtain and was sitting down on the bed; hearing Kou Zhong's remark, his heart ached, recalling Fu Junchuo and Sister-in-law Zhen [See Book 1 Chapter 2]: the former's sweet soul was already gone, the latter's whereabouts was unknown. He could not help feeling depressed.

Currently Elder Sister Su was the closest woman to them, but her happiness was closely related to Xiang Yushan; would they be this helpless for the rest of their lives?

Kou Zhong mused, "Our trip back to the north this time could very well be the most dangerous journey we ever take. We don't even know for sure how many enemies we have out there."

Taking a very deep breath, Xu Ziling said, "Starting tomorrow, we will have Duan Yucheng and the others subjected to the most rigorous training we can muster, so that they at least will have the ability to protect themselves."

Kou Zhong nodded. "How many days do you think we ought to stay here?" he asked, "If we leave too early, Su Jie will certainly blame us."

"Why don't we stay with Su Jie for ten more days?" Xu Ziling replied, "Incidentally we can also use this time to drill Yucheng and the others."

Kou Zhong agreed, "Let's do it just as you said."

"How's the situation with Beautiful Shifu?" Xu Ziling asked.

“Of course she wants to come with us to the north,” Kou Zhong replied, “But she is going to make her own arrangement.”

And then immediately lowering his voice, he said, “That Xiang kid told me quietly that she is going to rendezvous with Dugu Ce, that’s why she is unwilling to leave Baling. Asking for this woman to be devoted to just one man is probably more difficult than plucking the bright moon from the sky.”

Frowning, Xu Ziling said, “Why did that Xiang kid tell you this kind of thing? This is totally unlike him.”

Letting out a cold snort, Kou Zhong said, “Naturally he received Xiao Xian, that old fox’s order; he is trying to damage my relationship with Beautiful Shifu. Currently Haisha Bang has suffered severe setback, leaving only Jukun Bang, Shuilong [water dragon] Bang, and Daijiang [great river] Bang. In Xiao Xian’s eyes, Beautiful Shifu is a lot more important than us.”

Xu Ziling spoke in heavy voice, “Just now our side warned Xiang kid, if Su Jie is the least bit unhappy, I will demand explanation from him.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Even if he has guts as high as the sky, he won’t dare bully Su Jie. Ay! I still don’t understand why did Su Jie agree to marry him.”

Shushing him, Xu Ziling said, “It’s no use talking about it now.” After pausing, he went on, “Do you know why I want to stay for that long, ten days? Although you agree, I know that you actually don’t have any choice.”

Kou Zhong was stunned, “I really have not thought about it,” he replied, “I only think that being with Su Jie right now is the most important priority. As long as I am with her, I feel relaxed and comfortable.”

Xu Ziling apologetically said, “It was me who had weird thought. In my opinion, Evil Monk, Amorous Nun, and those vicious people would look for us to give us trouble. If we could ruthlessly inflict heavy losses to them first before starting out, our journey would be a lot smoother!”

Frowning, Kou Zhong said, "This place is Baling Bang's domain; do you think they'd dare to come here and run amuck?"

Xu Ziling smiled and said, "We came to their domain and killed Ren Shaoming, naturally they also want to kill us in our domain, so that they could show off their prowess. Therefore, unless they are not coming, they would definitely want to, using the ten-thousand-junpower, inflict the biggest casualties and heaviest damage in the shortest possible time."

Raising his scimitar-like eyebrows, Kou Zhong laughed grimly and said, "Hence they must be sending people in advance to scout the situation and gather information. If we could intercept these vanguard troops, we can defeat them before they start, humph!"

With an indifferent laugh Xu Ziling said, "If I were they, I would take advantage while we go out with Su Jie on a tour to make my move; don't you agree?"

Kou Zhong's tiger-eyes immediately lit up.

Xu Ziling went on, "Once we are going up north to transport the salt, we will be in the open while the enemies are in the dark; we will be caught in the disadvantageous situation of an absolute passive position. Tactically, it is extremely unwise. If we cannot get hold of the initiative, I can guarantee that we will never reach Guanzhong."

Kou Zhong was astounded, "What's going on today?" he asked, "It seems to me that you have never been this enthusiastic and proactive about these things."

Xu Ziling shifted over to the window; with his hands behind his back he turned his gaze toward the starry sky outside, and said mysteriously, "The moment we killed Ren Shaoming, I suddenly felt myself stepping into another stage of my life's journey. Yet I know clearly that we have an unclear entanglement with several evil forces, and are being sucked into the maelstrom of the present age. We can't avoid it; either we choose to kill ourselves, or choose to confront it. There is no third possibility."

Turning his head around, he noticed that Kou Zhong was staring at him with some strange expression. “Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked in astonishment.

Kou Zhong stood up abruptly, and then spoke in earnestness, “Because you have just displayed the prestige and style of a martial art master of the present age. What struck me the most was that it looked so smooth and natural.”

Xu Ziling smiled, “Oh please don’t lick Xiaodi’s butt,” he said, “Are you saying that you don’t realize that recently your mannerism has also changed? Swindling, pretending, leading, listening, teaching, and every now and then speaking some pompous words, deceiving me big time.”

Kou Zhong slapped his shoulders hard and roared in laughter, “Sometimes a man shouldn’t be that forthcoming,” he said, “There is one more thing that I haven’t told you about: do you know who Song Yuzhi’s future husband is? My Niang! It’s Li Mi’s only son.”

Although Xu Ziling was fully aware that Kou Zhong deliberately changed the subject, he still could not help crying out involuntarily, “What?”

Kou Zhong let his hand off Xu Ziling’s shoulder; leaning on the window sill, he gazed into the boundless moonlit night, with gleaming eyes he said, “This is the Song Clan and Wagang Army’s business deal. North and south aligning themselves, together they are going to deal with the Li Clan of the northwest. If we can’t find a way to crush this north-south union, the world will eventually fall into the hands of Li Mi.”

Letting out a wry smile, Xu Ziling said, “Are you persuading me to agree with you in exploiting Song Yuzhi?”

Kou Zhong smiled and shook his head, “You despise me, Kou Zhong, too much,” he said, “As long as we can prevent Li Mi from taking over Luoyang, the engagement will be invalidated. At that time, whomever the Song family’s Big Miss wants to marry, I, Kou Zhong will not destroy her happiness. However, if by that time she finds out that she is helpless to leave the Ol’ Kou, it will be the Ol’ Kou’s good fortune. How’s that? Am I forthcoming enough for you?”

Xu Ziling shrugged his shoulders, “All right!” he said, “We are all adults, let’s leave this matter in Laotianye’s hands. Right now let us focus our attention to deal with the enemy. Other things, we will think about it when we are still alive later!”

Knitting his brows, Kou Zhong said, “Are you implying that we must go to bed now? We haven’t talked happily and excitedly like this, and haven’t been getting along so well like this for a long time. Ha! These words ‘getting along well’ are so appropriate.”

Xu Ziling spoke indifferently, “While we are getting along very well and our amiable talk is in full swing, I’ve got a hunch that Evil Monk, Amorous Nun and their cronies are lying low in the vicinity of Baling, waiting for an opportunity to kill us.”

Kou Zhong sat down and mused, “Perhaps they are even inside the city already. Is there any way we could lure them out?”

Calm and composed, Xu Ziling said, “He who comes is surely ill-intentioned, no-one well-meaning will come. If we wait for them to act first, it would be difficult for us to avoid dead and injured; hence the best strategy is whether we could gain the initiative by striking first.”

A faint smile, brimming with confidence, appeared on the corner of Kou Zhong’s mouth; he said slowly, “This time we will be dealing with our enemy without relying on Xiao Xian’s support at all; only by doing this will we reach our goal of tempering ourselves.”

After thinking deeply, he added, “In my opinion, due to their distinctive appearance, Evil Monk and Amorous Nun would not dare to venture into the city. Rather, they would send their people to spy and watch our movements. So they must be somewhere outside Xiang kid’s General Mansion, watching our coming and going. As long as we can find those spies, we can launch the anti-tracking operation, and will be one step ahead in killing the enemy.”

Xu Ziling said, “After failed assassination attempt by Yang Xuyan, Xiang kid’s

military mansion's security is strengthened considerably; they even have hidden sentries outside the mansion. Therefore, if the opponents are sending people here, they must be good in hiding their tracks and are martial art experts in qinggong, so that it won't be easy for us to detect their movement and find their hiding place. Therefore, unless we have certain technique, it might be hard to find such people."

Kou Zhong laughed aloud. "Don't worry!" he said, "Leave it to me. If even Evil Monk, Amorous Nun, I am unable to deal with, would I talk about vying over the world?"

Book 8 Chapter 7 – The Mysterious Giant Ship

Early morning the next day, Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong supervised and urged Duan Yucheng, four people to train and spar against each other.

While Kou Zhong, using a whip, was straining Bao Zhifu and Shi Jie to their limit, Yun Yuzhen came to stand by Xu Ziling and watch. Amazed at the situation in the arena, she said, “These two’s martial art skill is indeed not bad, how did you get them back here?”

‘Dang!’

Bao Zhifu’s broadsword was coiled by Kou Zhong’s whip and was pulled away.

Xu Ziling cast a sidelong glance toward the radiant-looking Yun Yuzhen. His eyes then fell onto the double-spear wielding Duan Yucheng, who was taking over Bao Zhifu’s position. “Ma Gui, your turn!” he barked his order.

Ma Gui shouted his acknowledgement, his left and right hands successively shot three iron bullets toward the vital points on the pit of Kou Zhong’s stomach and his crotch.

Yun Yuzhen immediately jumped in fear, thinking that even the training looked a lot like a life and death struggle.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud, his body swayed, Ma Gui’s secret projectiles all hit empty space.

Only then did Xu Ziling smile and asked, “Beautiful Shifu, why are you up so early?”

Casting him a flirtatious glance, Yun Yuzhen replied, “I was concerned over you guys!”

Forcing a laughter, Xu Ziling said, “Shifu seems to mistake me for Kou Zhong again!”

Yun Yuzhen’s pretty face blushed slightly. Awkwardly she glowered at him and said, “I thought you are not going to bring that matter up anymore.”

By ‘that matter’, naturally she was referring to she was throwing herself in Xu Ziling’s bosom and kissing him, mistaking him for Kou Zhong.

Xu Ziling laughed indifferently, stepped into the arena, and shouted, “My turn!”

Kou Zhong retrieved his whip and withdrew to Yun Yuzhen’s side. Xu Ziling used his bare hands to face the four men.

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “These four boys are getting more and more formidable. It proves that we have original insight, and that we use the correct method in teaching them. Humph! With me by your side last night, Beautiful Shifu naturally tossed and turned restlessly, hard for you to sleep.”

Yun Yuzhen’s powdered face turned even redder; she spat and said, “I don’t know how fragrant and sweet my sleep was. Why is it that men always arrogantly thought that girls can’t do anything without them?”

Kou Zhong breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s very good,” he said, “I was afraid Beautiful Shifu could not do without me. In that case, when I leave in a few days, I won’t have to rush back anytime soon.”

Albeit knowing that Kou Zhong was teasing her, Yun Yuzhen could not help getting angry, “Kou Zhong!” she snapped, “You bully me too much!”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, "I was just testing Yun Bangzhu's heart. Hee! Su Jie is here, do you want to go out and have fun with us?"

Yun Yuzhen cast him an angry look and said, "Only ghosts want to accompany you!"

After giving him a sweet smile, she simply left.

The carriage left the General Mansion. Eight riders opened up the path, eight riders protected from behind, plus Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling riding leisurely side by side with Susu's carriage.

Susu was relaxed and was in a very good mood, every now and then she chatted and laughed with the two boys through the window; they were happy and were in harmonious relationship.

The cavalcade exited the city via the north gate, their destination was Linjiang Pavilion at the upper reaches of the River, a well-known scenic spot outside the city of Baling, from which they would be able to feast their eyes on the beautiful scenery of the Yangtze River.

Outside the city, Susu followed the two boys' suggestion to take a break in the wayside. Kou Zhong noticed that not only Xu Ziling seemed to be deep in thought, his face also seemed a bit pale. "What are you thinking?" Kou Zhong asked.

Xu Ziling hesitated for half a day before relying, "I suddenly remembered Yang Xuyan. I wonder whom does he work for?"

Frowning, Kou Zhong said, "Didn't somebody say that he is in pursuit of Yang Shichong's beautiful daughter? They all surnamed Yang, naturally it should be easy to get close to each other!" [I think it ought to be Wang Shichong. Author's error?]

After a quick and thoughtful glance toward the dock outside the city, Xu Ziling

said, “Of course I remember that. I just think something does not fit here. Right now the person Yang Shichong fears the most ought to be Li Mi, and then Xiao Xian comes after him.”

Deep in thought, Kou Zhong commented, “It won’t make sense even more if he is working for Lin Shihong. Someone like Yang Xuyan, who is of the royal family origin, would not have anything to do with Lin Shihong, who is of lulin [lit. green forest, *i.e.* criminal world] origin. But you are also right, if I were Yang Shichong, how could I have time to deal with the things in the south?”

“If Yang Xuyan is not Yang Shichong’s man,” Xu Ziling continued, “He must be related to one of the Four Major Clans. The Song Clan is at odds with the royal family, plus they tend to stay in the south, so we can eliminate them. That leaves us with the Li Clan, the Dugu Clan, and the Yuwen Clan.”

Kou Zhong analyzed, “Dugu Clan has always been an ally of Baling Bang, so they can also be eliminated. That leaves us Yuwen Clan and Li Clan. It seems to me that Yuwen Clan has a slightly higher possibility. Ay! But Yuwen Clan is also too busy with their own problems; just like Yang Shichong, they don’t have time to meddle with the south. My Niang, could it be that Li Shimin guy?”

Xu Ziling was emotionally moved, “That possibility is really high,” he said, “That Li guy has an acute foresight [orig. stand tall and see far], a man with power, aptitude, and broad outlook. Only he has the ability to see through the Xiang kid’s importance; if he were killed, Xiao Xian would turn half-blind. From this, it could be seen that that Li guy thinks highly of Xiao Xian.”

Kou Zhong nodded, “In Sunzi’s [Sun Tzu] Art of War, it is said ‘know yourself and know your enemy, and you will never be defeated’. Speaking about the vastness and density of the intelligence network, no hole left un-entered, nothing surpasses Xiang kid’s network of brothels and casinos all over the country. Hey! Li guy plus Yang Xuyan, won’t you say they are an interesting combination?”

This moment Susu opened the curtain and stuck her head out, “Hey! It’s so boring here! Come and chat with Jiejie, all right?”

Back at the General Mansion that evening, Duan Yucheng reported, “Subordinates followed two Bangzhu’s instruction: from the time the carriage left the door, we monitor any movement all around, but we did not find anybody following your track, or any unusual activity.”

The two boys returned to their room, totally mystified, and even more disappointed.

Could it be that they have guessed incorrectly? Or perhaps the enemies were clever enough to evade Duan Yucheng, four men’s detection?

Slapping the table, Kou Zhong exclaimed, “It does not make sense. Yucheng and the others’ monitoring positions are strategically located and carefully selected; as long as anybody was following our trail, they would definitely see it. Unless ... hey!”

Xu Ziling caught on, “I don’t believe that the Evil Monk and Amorous Nun would be willing to swallow their pride to do it personally. That Evil Monk is irascible, he won’t have the patience to wait for long. Unless ...”

The two boys looked at each other, with myriads of thoughts flashing through their minds.

Unless they were waiting for reinforcement, there was no reason to miss their chances of attacking and killing them outside the city.

Supposing Evil Monk and Amorous Nun were really Yin Gui Pai people, the reinforcement must be from Yin Gui Pai or perhaps martial art masters from Qu Ao’s side; this was definitely not a trivial matter.

Kou Zhong blew a mouthful of cold air. “We must never take Su Jie out of the city,” he said, “We’ll simply use an empty carriage as a decoy and forget about it.”

Frowning, Xu Ziling said, “We must find a way to have our passive situation reversed; it would be best if we can do it ahead of the enemy’s martial art

masters' arrival, we need to be one step ahead by getting rid of Evil Monk and Amorous Nun, otherwise we will meet a disaster."

Grabbing his own head, Kou Zhong said, "Have you ever thought that this matter is really strange? On the surface, basically Evil Monk and Amorous Nun don't even know that we are related to Baling Bang, they did not even know that after the killing we would slip away to Baling. Why do we always think that they clearly know our whereabouts and are ready to ambush us anytime?"

"This is purely some kind of almost supernatural intuition," Xu Ziling replied, "I can't explain it."

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "It is thus clear that the 'Secret to Long Life' is indeed a Taoist treasure, plus in this aspect you are much more keener than I am. Simply because your state of mind is closer to 'real warrior' cultivation. No! You are basically an authentic [orig. replacement guaranteed if not genuine] Ziling Zhenren [lit. true/real person, Taoist Master]. Hee! The only thing lacking is the Taoist robe. It would be best if you and that Shi Feixuan make a pair, and snatch away Hou Xibai's heart of love. Ha!"

Xu Ziling spoke in anguish, "In time like this you are still talking nonsense."

"This is not nonsense," Kou Zhong seriously replied, "Supposing you really have this kind of supernatural intuition, we might as well exploit it to our advantage. For example, can you feel the approximate position of the enemy?"

Xu Ziling was silent for half a day; he slowly shook his head and said, "No! I simply have an ominous feeling. That's all."

Kou Zhong rose up to his full height and said, "We'd better conduct an experiment. Let's go around the city first, if it doesn't work, then we'll go out of the city. Supposing the feeling of danger in your heart is getting stronger, it will mean that we are getting closer to the enemy. I guarantee that this kind of investigative method has not been used since the dawn of time until today. It will be unimaginable, and it can kill the enemy unprepared."

Severely shaken, Xu Ziling said, "We won't need to go around the city. Do you

remember when we first came out of the city this morning, you asked me what am I thinking? I replied by asking you if you remembered Yang Xuyan; actually, that matter came later. At that time my feeling of danger was increasing substantially, my heart felt very uncomfortable. It was just like the feeling I got before Yang Xuyan mounted a sneak attack on us that day. That was the reason I was thinking of Yang Xuyan. But after we headed west, that singular sensation gradually disappeared.”

Kou Zhong was greatly delighted, “That will do,” he said, “Outside the gates, the piers are full of ships and boats in all kinds of shapes and sizes, one must be the enemy’s hideouts. At that time they must be watching us in secret, to determine whether they should trail us and make their move; that’s why it induced a reaction from you, just like the other day when Yang Xuyan was trying to assassinate Xiang kid. Ha! This time we hit the jackpot!”

Xu Ziling rose up suddenly. His tiger-eyes flashed with sharp glints, he spoke in heavy voice, “There is no time to lose, we’ll go now to give the enemies an unexpected shock they won’t forget for the rest of their lives.”

The one-li-or-so long pier outside the city of Baling was full with docking ships and boats, big and small; at least there were two or three hundreds of them. On the vast shoreline stood about a dozen or so canopied structures, where goods and cargo, which did not make it into the city that day, were piled like small hills.

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong followed the water line, and crouched behind a pile of goods, looking at the hundreds of flickering lights coming from the ships. They had no idea where to start looking for the enemy.

“Do you feel anything stronger anywhere?” Kou Zhong whispered.

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, “I don’t feel anything at all. Ay! Shall we go back to sleep?”

Kou Zhong shook his head to indicate he had different ideas. He said thoughtfully, “Supposing we stick our ears to the bottom of the boats and apply our inner strength to eavesdrop, do you think we will be able to listen to the conversation inside the boat?”

“So what if we could?” Xu Ziling was displeased, “Supposing the people in the boat are sleeping or not talking, do you still want to continue taking turn in eavesdropping? Don’t forget that there are hundreds of boats here. Even if we only listen for a moment each, we won’t even cover one tenth by daybreak.”

Finally Kou Zhong relented. “We’ll come back tomorrow then,” he said disappointedly, “I hope your feeling will be a bit stronger by then. Huh?!”

Following Kou Zhong’s gaze, Xu Ziling saw a skiff, without any light on it, was weaving through the rows after rows of ships, coming toward the shore. By looking at the speed of the boat, they knew that the one steering it was a very capable sailor.

Applying their inner power, the two boys focused their attention to the boat; they did not wish to miss any movement or sound.

On the boat stood two people: one man and one woman. The youthful looking woman was standing on the bow. Just by looking at her clothes, they knew that she was a maid. She had a graceful and good-looking countenance, but there was a little bit of licentious feeling on her. The man looked thick and solid, but his face looked uncouth. Apparently this man had the same capacity as the woman; they were both maid and servant.

The skiff was fast approaching. Before it even reached the shore, the maid soared into the air. With several ups and downs she reached the dark shore, while under the skillful hand of the servant the skiff stopped ashore to wait.

The two boys were overjoyed at this turn of events. Although they could not ascertain if these two were Evil Monk, Amorous Nun’s people, this matter was definitely incomparable to their previous situation where they had no clue of what to do.

After exchanging eye signals, the two boys stealthily circled around and went down into the water outside the male servant’s range of vision. A moment later they reached the bottom of the boat and applied their strength to attach themselves to the boat. They used this opportunity to cultivate their strength to

deal with the hard fighting that might come soon.

Less than half a sichen later, the maid returned. The servant asked, "Did you get it?"

"Uh huh," the maid replied, indicating that she did indeed get what they were looking for.

The skiff set off, the servant and the maid on the skiff no longer speak.

Quite half a day later, the skiff reached a huge sea-going ship, and stopped by its side.

The two boys left the skiff and dove under the giant ship. Sticking their ears to the hull, they seemed to hear voices, too bad the sound of the waves lapping against the hull distorted it, so that they could not hear it clearly.

Kou Zhong pulled Xu Ziling away; as the two of them emerged from the water at the aft, he said, "How do you catch the tiger cub without entering the tiger's lair? Well?"

Xu Ziling laughed and said, "No need to talk too much, go!"

The two boys looked at each other's eyes and laughed. They climbed up, stopped at the edge of the deck, and craned their necks to take a peek.

Even at its bottom, this ship already felt huge. Now that they looked from this angle, it felt even grander; the hull extended to more than two hundred chi. Three floors of cabin towered above the main deck, with more than thirty cabin windows, but only four of those windows were lighted, and they heard voices coming out of these windows.

But the deck was quiet, no one was in sight.

Putting his mouth close to Kou Zhong's ear, Xu Ziling whispered, "I found two

guards on sentry duty, both are on the third floor. Clearly their job is mainly to monitor any movement of other boats on the surface of the river, not to watch for any activity on the deck.”

Kou Zhong nonchalantly said, “We’ll just have to gamble his mother’s a bit; if things go awry, we’ll escape via the water. Let’s go!”

The two boys somersaulted over the railings. Crouching low on the deck, they crept toward the aft and hid in the shadow. Not only their movement was as fast as a ghost, they were in sync with each other, as if they had already practiced this mission a hundred or a thousand times before.

They did not dare to rashly break into the cabin. Focusing their power in their ears, they listened carefully and quietly. A man’s voice was heard inside. The man said, “When the two boys fight together, they become especially formidable that even Ren Shaoming ended up in injustice death. Therefore, when we fight, we must pick just one and go all out to kill him, and then we can capture the other one and torture him to extort his confession. I don’t believe he won’t spill the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’s’ secret.”

Listening to this, the two boys looked at each other in shock; wasn’t it the voice of Dajiang Hui’s Second Chief ‘Tiger Lord’ Pei Yan, who pursued and attacked them at the mouth of the river when they had just left Changshu? At that time there was also Wang Kuijie, whose martial art was extremely strong.

This time they were looking for Evil Monk and Amorous Nun, but unexpectedly found a ‘second carriage’.

Another unfamiliar voice said, “We will wait for eight days until after they cross the River to the north before using the force of a ten-thousand-jun thunderbolt to either capture or kill them in one fell swoop. With our strength, dealing with them ought to be as easy as pinching a few ants.”

This person was speaking in a variable voice; sometimes it was low and muffled, sometimes it turned shrill and sharp, somewhat disjointed, so that it was quite uncomfortable to listen to.

If his voice became like that due to the martial art he trained, then it must be an eccentric, strange, heretical and unusual martial art that was hard to estimate.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's countenance changed. Not because of the strange voice, but because the opposite side had such an accurate information of their whereabouts. Needless to say, someone must have tipped them off; no wonder they did not have to send anybody to watch the two boys' movement.

A muffled female voice filled with hatred said, "We'll kill that Xu Ziling, and captured Kou Zhong, who attacked us the other day. I want him to suffer all kinds of torture before we kill him."

Just by listening to the fiery animosity in her voice, one would immediately know that she hated Kou Zhong to her heart and to her lungs.

The two boys felt that the voice sounded familiar, but momentarily they could not figure out whose voice was it.

Another charming and sweet female voice, as soft as the clouds in the sky, spoke indifferently, "You Xiang's [female immortal/goddess/fairy] desire is definitely attainable. Those two boys must be proud for being able to facilitate the joining hands of Die and Shen Dangjia [Chief]. When we declare our kingship in the future, we can have them to thank!"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling immediately remembered that the woman who hated them to her guts must be Haisha Bang's pretty nun, You Qiuyan, the other 'Amorous Nun'.

Shen Dangjia must be Shen Faxing, to whom Haisha Bang recently pledged their allegiance to be his hunting dogs. The allied force has suffered devastating setback in the two boys' hands; no wonder they were this thirsty of revenge.

But who was the girl's dad? It sounded as if Dajiang Hui was also taking orders from him.

Shen Faxing's voice was heard, "This time Princess Mei presides over this mission, I am sure the two boys will fall into our hands. After we obtain the 'Duke Yang Treasure', plus the alliance of our Jiangnan and Garuda [Jialouluo], two armies, won't we have the world [tianxia – China] in our bag?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's heart shivered in fear. They finally realized who this Princess Mei's dad was.

Among the warlords vying for supremacy over the world [China], in terms of brutality, nothing could surpass Zhu Can, who called himself Garuda King, whose fame and power was, currently, growing day by day.

It was said that when Garuda Army lacked provision, they even cooked human beings for food. This matter might be grossly exaggerated, yet it showed how bad their reputation was.

Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling's ear, "What do we do? Perhaps we could carve 'Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were here' with a knife, so that they would jump in fear."

"No!" Xu Ziling shook his head, "That way we will never become real martial art masters. We might as well go his mother's all out, so that in the future they will not be in our way."

Kou Zhong grabbed Xu Ziling's shoulder forcefully, his tiger-eyes were gleaming. "All right!" he said, "We will change according to the situation. We'll see whose fist is a bit harder. Hee!"

Book 8 Chapter 8 – Brilliant Scheme To Break The Enemy

Kou Zhong was about to move, but Xu Ziling pulled him back. While he was baffled, Xu Ziling pressed his mouth on Kou Zhong's ear and said, "Zhong Shao, you must not forget that we are now contending over the world, not trying to show off our bravery. We need to talk about strategy."

Kou Zhong was stunned. "What brilliant scheme are you thinking?" he asked.

Xu Ziling replied in low voice, "Do you remember the battleship we took on our way from Jiujiang to Baling? The bow is equipped with pointed iron. If we drive it fast enough, I guarantee we can hit this gigantic and stiff ship squarely in the middle and break it into two."

Greatly delighted, Kou Zhong said, "You, this kid, are actually more aggressive than I am, yet you normally pretend to be Taoist teacher who don't care about fame and fortune. Hee! Don't you feel that tonight you are so not normal?"

"Cut it out!" Xu Ziling snapped at him.

The two boys woke Bu Tianzhi, who remained on the [Jukun Bang] ship, up. Having understood the situation clearly, he excitedly said, "Let me dispatch someone to notify General Xiang immediately. If we can capture Zhu Mei, it would be like severing one of Zhu Can's arms."

Kou Zhong hurriedly said, "The enemy is saving their oil by not lighting any lamp, plus they must have set up sentries onshore to send them warning. If you

are going out with magnificent army with thousands of men and horses, the enemy would have to be bird-brained if they do not immediately run away. Fu Bangzhu [Deputy Gang Leader] must act according to our plan. You are in charge of driving our ship into theirs, we will be in charge of going underwater to capture the enemy. This is called cooperation and division of work. Do you understand?”

Xu Ziling also asked, “Is Zhu Mei formidable?”

While nodding his head to acknowledge Kou Zhong’s instruction, Bu Tianzhi answered Xu Ziling’s question, “Zhu Mei is like having Zhu Can’s brains but with beauty like flower, and poison like serpent and scorpion. I don’t know how many heroes have met their tragic end under her ‘floating cloud’ sleeves.”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Good thing that under water no floating cloud sleeves can be used; let us see how beautiful and how fierce she really is.”

Bu Tianzhi suddenly sighed and said, “Not only two Gongzi’s action is beyond expectation, the method you come up with is even more amazing, like opening up the sky. Tianzhi received benefits from your instruction!”

He summoned his men at once and had them quietly raise the anchor and set sail upstream.

The warship slowly turned around. On the deck stood more than a hundred Jukun Bang warriors, each one skillful in using bow and arrow, ready to meet the enemy head-on. Twelve sets of catapult were also at the ready, poised for action.

Ever since the two boys succeeded in killing Ren Shaoming, the Jukun Bang people honored them as gods. This moment they were serving under the two boys’ command, their morale was like rainbow, everybody was in high spirit.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, with bow in their hands, stood on the bridge, giving direction to the target’s position. Bu Tianzhi continuously giving instructions, the ship was slowly accelerating.

The river was quiet, the only audible noise was the waves lapping against the shore, a gentle reminder of nature's perpetual motion. The moon already moved away from its zenith in the sky, the river reflected its light, creating patterns of light and darkness.

There were hundreds of ships and boats, big and small, on the river that night, not one was aware of the impending battle.

When they were about two hundred zhang away from their target, the giant ship, which cast its anchor, alone, at the outskirts of the harbor, the warship turned toward the bend on the opposite bank, preparing to increase its momentum.

Kou Zhong said to Xu Ziling, "To contend for hegemony over the world, we must line up talents. Otherwise, even though we have this brilliant scheme, we won't be able to execute it."

Xu Ziling looked at the fully opened sail, but did not say anything.

Kou Zhong could not help asking, "Xiao Ling, why are you so proactive tonight?"

Xu Ziling turned his gaze toward the giant ship right ahead, he said in heavy voice, "You are my best brother in the world, since I already promised to help you acquire the 'Duke Yang Treasure', how would it work if I am not being proactive?"

Kou Zhong felt his heart suddenly grew warm; he was unable to speak.

Xu Ziling reached out and put his hand on Kou Zhong's shoulder, he said gently, "It is also for Su Jie's sake. Those people have a mole inside Xiang kid's mansion, naturally they are very clear about Su Jie's relationship with us. If they could not do anything to us, maybe they would try to get Su Jie into their hands. Therefore, we must capture one or two leaders from the opposite party alive, hand them over to Xiang kid, let him force confession by torture, uncover the mole within, and only then will Su Jie's safety be guaranteed."

The warship picked up speed, fast like a runaway horse it rode the waves straight toward the flank of the giant ship.

Only this moment did the enemy find out something was amiss; alarm went off, human shadows flickered everywhere. But it was too late to change their fate. It was as if the sacred state of tranquility was suddenly shattered.

“Attack!” Bu Tianzhi thundered.

Like thunderstorm huge rocks, arrows and darts rained onto the enemy’s warship, battle cry shook the River.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling also shot their arrows. Wood pieces flew, the sail mast broke. Amidst the miserable cry of the enemies hit by the arrows, there was a loud ‘Boom!’ as like a mad bull the pointy iron figurehead of Jukun Bang warship rammed into the weakest part on the starboard side of the enemy’s ship.

The sound of the ship splitting and the wood snapping rang continuously, the enemy’s ship leaned toward the opposite side and spun around.

Their own warship also shook suddenly and leaned sideways. After a burst of ear-piercing grinding noise, the warship rubbed itself along the bow of the enemy’s ship. The warship was pushed outward and thus recovered its balance.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling soared into the air, traversing the empty space between the two ships, toward a large gaping hole on the hull of the enemy’s ship, which, by this time, was still spinning slowly around.

The enemy was thrown into chaos; the lantern lost its light, nobody knew how many people were thrown into the water that night.

Other people on the ships and boats all around were awakened by the noise, so that there were commotions everywhere.

By the time Kou Zhong landed onto the other side’s bridge, the giant ship already started to tilt and sink down. The enemy simply did not have any heart to

fight, one after another they slipped down into the water to escape. The pandemonium was like the coming of the doomsday.

In this extreme confusion, he saw two graceful figures breaking out of the window and cast themselves into the river. Their movement was agile, fast and nimble.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and ran after them.

On the other side, Xu Ziling landed on the bow. Like a tiger entering a flock of sheep he attacked like crazy, those who tried to block him were completely routed.

By this time, due to the hull was tilting sideways, the deck has also sloped down, so that whoever got hit were rolling down the slope, straight into the river below, battered and completely exhausted.

Suddenly there was a loud shout behind him, coming from above going down, coupled with a gust of wind.

Xu Ziling was in the height of the fighting spirit; without even looking, after throwing down an enemy, his palm struck backhandedly.

‘Bang!’

Xu Ziling was jolted by the impact that he nearly fell down the slope, but the enemy was also severely shaken that he staggered back and nearly fell down.

Taking advantage of this slight intermission, the rest of the enemies scrambled away to run for their lives.

This moment Bu Tianzhi’s warship already made a U-turn and rained down arrows onto the enemies still floating on the river.

After taking a sharp intake of a mouthful of true qi, Xu Ziling turned around to

see the enemy face-to-face. With astonishment he found out that it was none other than the Second Chief of the Dajiang Hui, the 'Tiger Lord' Pei Yan, with whom he has had a predestined affinity to meet once.

Pei Yan's pair of vicious eyes flickered continuously; apparently because he had tested Xu Ziling's extremely strong power, fear was starting to creep into his heart, and so he continuously withdrew toward the top of the slope.

The giant ship has sunken down more than half. Other than they, there was no other enemy on the deck.

Xu Ziling slowly pressed forward, using the edge of his palms like sabers, he sent out his true power by hacking from a distance, putting the opponent under his control. Laughing calmly, he said, "Er Dangjia, you want to run away too?"

Pei Yan swung his broadsword. "Pei!" he spat while halted his step, and then shouted harshly, "It won't be too late to leave after killing you, this kid."

Lightning fast Xu Ziling slid sideways, and sent out a punch over the empty air. Pei Yan roared and nearly tumbled down.

What happened was that because Xu Ziling suddenly changed position, plus his punch came from an unbelievably ingenious angle, it immediately hit Pei Yan's right shoulder. Not only the pain penetrated his bones and marrows, he even nearly lost his grip on his saber. Actually, he was not this useless, it's just that he was not in the mood to fight, and was already intimidated by Xu Ziling, and thus Xu Ziling was able to exploit this weakness.

At this moment his desire to escape was growing, but while he was about to slip backward, like a ghost or demon Xu Ziling suddenly came to his right side. Helplessly he roared while turning the saber into his left hand, and then he counterattacked with everything he had.

Xu Ziling chose to take a 'floating' tactic; no matter how Pei Yan dodged, he was always able to force him to block with all his strength, jolting his left hand that it turned numb, and was incapable of carrying out even fifty percent of his usual strength.

Under this constant barrage, before long Pei Yan's left arm was hit by Xu Ziling's finger, his broadsword fell off.

Scared out of his wits, Pei Yan unleashed his 'pressing down on the box/chest's bottom', he deliberately rolled down the slope, while his legs swept swiftly; it was extremely vicious.

Xu Ziling let out a long laugh, his fists punched together. When he was about to subdue the enemy in one stroke, a burst of an extremely sharp wind shot from his left side.

By the time Xu Ziling realized suddenly that the enemy has been hiding behind the cabin door, the enemy's sword has already enveloped the space to his left, the sword qi pervaded the air.

In that split second, Xu Ziling already determined that the attacker's power was at least two notches above Pei Yan's. If he did not go all-out to deal with him, most likely he would suffer a heavy loss. Therefore, without any choice he abandoned Pei Yan, turned around and waved his hand to parry the enemy's sword.

'Bang!'

Palm and sword collided.

Xu Ziling was shaken that his blood and qi bubbled up within him, and he was forced to slide two steps sideways to neutralize it.

The attacker borrowed the reaction force from the impact to fly away, and landed on the tilting sail mast.

Pei Yan had just reached the edge of the sloping deck; he had not entered the water yet.

The attacker was covered in black clothes; he was lanky and handsome, with extremely heavy make-up on his face. Letting out a long laugh, he said, "This time let's consider you win. But there will come a day when I, Bai Wenyuan, will repay you nicely."

With a somersault he entered the river.

His voice was sometimes low and muffled, sometimes shrill and overbearing; he was the person who spoke in the cabin.

By this time the water has reached the bottom of Xu Ziling's foot, the giant ship was finally sinking.

Under water, Kou Zhong was chasing the two women for nearly a li. When he was about four zhang away from them, the two women split up to the left and right to escape.

In the dark water, Kou Zhong selected one of them and exerted his strength to give chase.

From the opponent's beautiful diving and swimming style, he was quite sure that this mermaid was indeed You Qiuyan, particularly her sleek bald head; it was something that no one else would be able to impersonate.

Kou Zhong has fought face-to-face with her many times. In terms of underwater skill, he definitely could not match her, an underwater expert. However, in terms of internal strength and punching and kicking, he was far superior to her; hence he did not have any concern that she would fly out of the hollow of his palm.

Ahead, You Qiuyan seemed to lose strength, she started to slow down. Kou Zhong was amused inwardly, knowing that she was going to either release secret projectiles or throw a net; pretending not to know anything, he increased his speed instead, while at the same time his hand grabbed the whip around his waist, ready to give her a surprise shock.

Three zhang, two zhang, one zhang, You Qiuyan suddenly turned around, the net was thrown over his head.

Kou Zhong swiftly dove down, his right hand lightly groped his waist, the whip lashed out like sea serpent to coil itself around You Qiuyan; his left hand reached out toward the edge of the net, and transmitted his true strength via the net.

You Qiuyan's tender body was jolted, while the whip wound around her slender jade leg, sealing off her acupoints.

Succeeded in capturing his target, Kou Zhong brought her rising to the surface.

Upstream, the River was still shaking with shouts and yells; obviously the hunt and arrest game was still growing strong.

Kou Zhong planted a kiss on You Qiuyan's sweet lips, and said with a giggle, "Would Yan Jie [older sister Yan] like to make out in the River, or do you want to wait until we are ashore before we get intimate?"

After giving him a hard stare, You Qiuyan closed her beautiful eyes tightly. It was the only way she could show her helpless protest.

Kou Zhong embraced her and brought her up to the sandbar; pressing her body underneath his, he smiled and said, "Last time I let you off, thinking that you would feel grateful to me. Turns out the most vicious one toward me is you. Is your honored Bangzhu well?"

You Qiuyan opened up her beautiful eyes; staring at him coldly, she said, "Just kill me!"

Kou Zhong put his mouth on her jade-like sparkling and translucent small ear, and nibbled on her earlobe. "No!" he said, "I am still going to let you go!" And then he proceeded by patting open her arteries and veins acupoint. Springing up, heroically and loftily he said, "Because I like your beauty. The other day your honored Bangzhu wrapped his arm around your small waist, it irritated me so much that I did not know what I wanted to do to him. Ha! But in the end didn't I

manage to hold you and kiss you and touch you?”

You Qiuyan sprang up, her beautiful eyes spun around and around for a while; finally she sighed and said, “Kou Zhong, don’t you regret it. When I have the opportunity, I will definitely not let you off.”

Kou Zhong reached out to stroke her cheek; he laughed indifferently and said, “I know that you actually love me; hence the reason you hated me so much, but you just didn’t realize it! Let’s just wait and see.”

You Qiuyan was unsure whether she was mad at herself for not dodging when he stroked her cheek, or because she could not tell whether in her heart she loved or hated him; ferociously kicking the ground, she turned around and left.

Watching her beautiful back gradually going away, Kou Zhong could not help thinking about the ambiguous relationship between Dong Ming Princess and Xu Ziling, and then he also recalled Li Xiuning. Sighing, he rushed back toward the upper reaches of the River.

The first streak of dawn finally appeared on the eastern horizon.

The Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling-led military operation was a total success, it sent tremors throughout the City of Baling. The enemies captured were more than thirty people, three of which were women, including the maid who went ashore last night. The dead and the wounded were difficult to count because most were underwater and were carried away by the river.

Knowing that there was a mole inside the General Mansion, Xiao Xian and Xiang Yushan were extremely nervous; they launched an investigation immediately.

Yun Yuzhen was a little upset. She blamed the two boys for not informing her before going personally to deal with the enemy; she blamed them even more for not gaining her approval before going into battle, which was quite overstepping her authority.

However, under Kou Zhong's gentle ministrations, very quickly she went from anger to happiness. The two of them were soon laughing and joking as usual.

That evening, Kou Zhong inquired about the investigation concerning the mole. Xiang Yushan's countenance sank as he said, "She found out about it and already escaped."

Susu added, "She is one of my personal maids; she has been missing since going out this morning. Ay! I treated her like a sister, unexpectedly she could do such thing."

With a wry smile Xiang Yushan said, "She has been serving me since her childhood, I can't believe she has been bought by the enemy."

Knitting his brows, Xu Ziling asked, "Does she know martial art?"

Stunned, Xiang Yuzhan shook his head.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "You have been deceived. If my guess is right, the little maid was murdered. The objective is that you will think that there is no more mole in here."

Susu was severely shaken, "Xiao Mei!" she exclaimed, and burst into tears.

Xu Ziling shot Kou Zhong a reprimanding look. Helping Susu up, he brought her into the inner chamber to console her.

Kou Zhong slapped his forehead, "My bad!" he said remorsefully.

Yun Yuzhen spoke in low voice, "You are so good to Su Jie; others won't have anything to say."

Xiang Yushan muttered, "How can we dig this mole out and dismember his body into ten thousand pieces?"

Casting a glance toward the inner chamber, Kou Zhong heaved a deep sigh, and said heavily, “Just by making Su Jie grieving and shedding tears, I won’t let him off. Get that maid who was captured alive for me, I guarantee that I can get the mole’s identity from her.”

The maid was brought into the side pavilion. Kou Zhong waved the other people to get out of the pavilion.

The maid looked to be around twenty, her countenance was quite pretty, albeit a bit pale. But her expression was quite firm, evidently she refused to give in easily.

Kou Zhong say leisurely in an imperial-tutor chair [i.e. armchair]; smiling, he said, “Miss, please sit down!”

The maid shook her head with her lips closed tightly, showing clearly that she refused to talk.

Remaining calm and unfazed, Kou Zhong said, “As long as you agree to answer a few questions, I will immediately let you go, so you can enjoy your youthfulness well.”

The maid could only stare blankly, with a disbelief look on his eyes, but in the end she shook her head.

Knowing that she refused to believe that there was such an easy thing in the world, Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Who did not know that I, Kou Zhong, is a good person? Your master wanted to kill me, not because I did something bad, but because he is greedy of the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’; therefore, your master is the bad person. Ha! This logic is so simple; only idiots fail to understand it.”

Although the little maid did not speak, her face was no longer stretched so tight.

Kou Zhong patted his chest and said, “Let me, this good person, give you guarantee: as long as you agree to answer three questions of mine, I will let you

go.”

The little maid’s tender body trembled slightly; hanging her head down, she spoke hoarsely, “If I answer your question, but you accuse me of lying, then ...”

Kou Zhong cut her off, “Whether you lie or not, we will both know it. For instance, if you are hesitating, or perhaps you are stammering, then it will be clear that you are making up stories. In that case there is no need for us to continue!”

The little maid bit her lower lip. “Are you really going to ask me only three questions?” she asked.

Kou Zhong spread out his arms, “Of course!” he said, “I am not one who goes back on his word.”

Summoning her courage, the little maid looked up to meet his gaze; with her spirit returning to her pretty eyes, she said, “As long as I do not hesitate, and I am not stammering, then I can go?”

“That is correct,” Kou Zhong assured her, “But if you offend me by telling me lies, I will immediately waste your martial art, and then I’ll sell you to a low-class brothel, so that you’ll have to serve at least ten patrons a day. Do you understand?”

Hearing that, the little maid’s countenance changed greatly.

Actually, Kou Zhong did not even know how to waste anybody’s martial art skill, plus he would not possibly sell her to any pleasure house. It was all nothing but intimidation.

Quite half a day later, the little maid nodded her head in agreement.

Such an easy matter, anybody would find it hard to refuse. Kou Zhong was just feeling her heart, he did not have any concern that she would not fall into his trap.

His tiger-eyes gleamed with cold rays, Kou Zhong looked at the little maid, whose head was hung low, whose heart was trembling with trepidation, and said in heavy voice, "What's your name?"

The little maid was stunned. "My name is Xiao Qiu," she replied, while in her heart mused whether such an easy question could be considered the first question.

Slapping the small table next to him, Kou Zhong said, "You passed the first question!"

The little maid's heart was mad with delight; she spoke gently, "Kou Gongzi, please ask me your second question!"

With the same gentleness, Kou Zhong said, "The second question is, hey! Who is your master?"

"Princess Mei!" the little maid answered quickly.

Kou Zhong was pleased. "Congratulations Miss for passing two questions. After answering the next question, I will personally escort Miss out of the city to reunite with your family. It would be best if you don't come back to your Princess Mei. Such master with bad reputation, if you stay with her, disaster may come to you anytime. Let this time be a lesson to you."

The little maid said in low voice, "Gongzi, please ask your question!"

Kou Zhong deliberately stayed silent for half a day. When the little maid grew so nervous that her whole body trembled unnaturally, he suddenly shouted his last question, "Who gave you the letter last night?"

The little maid suddenly opened her mouth, but no word came out.

Kou Zhong thundered menacingly, "You fail!"

Tears flooding out of the little maid's eyes, she cried out anxiously, "But I don't know his name!"

Kou Zhong did not give her any chance to think deeply, "How tall is he?" he shouted.

The little maid did not dare to hesitate, she replied, "Half a head taller than me."

Subsequently Kou Zhong shot her more than a dozen questions in rapid succession. Finally he rose up and said, "I know who he is, I will take Miss out. Please stop crying!"

Book 8 Chapter 9 – Moon In The Well Champion

With smile on his face Kou Zhong entered the mail hall, he was met by Yun Yuzhen and Xiang Yushan's expectant glance, but he noticed that Xu Ziling was standing by the window, with neither concern nor delight on his face. Kou Zhong asked in amazement, "Xiao Ling, don't you want to know who the mole is?"

Xu Ziling replied indifferently, "How could such a tender young child be your, Zhong Shao's opponent? Unless she basically does not know anything."

Unable to hold back, Xiang Yushan asked, "What's the outcome?"

Kou Zhong sat down opposite the two people, "It's one of your personal guards," he said, "I think his name is Ouyang Ji or something. You know what to do!"

A strong murderous intent flared in Xiang Yushan's eyes; without saying a word he stood up and left.

Kou Zhong winked at Yun Yuzhen and said, "Would Beautiful Shifu be interested in a trip out of town with us, two brothers? I promised to escort that poor girl out of the city!"

The next several days, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling devoted their heart and mind to push Duan Yucheng, four men to train martial art. The four, on the other hand, also realized that this matter concerned their honor and disgrace, their life and death, plus they obtained these two highly talented brilliant masters'

direction, therefore, they strived and hence advanced by leaps and bounds.

The rest of the time, the two boys abandoned everything to go with Susu on scenic tours, doing their best to make her happy.

Time flew. The next day they were going to start their journey north. Xiao Xian hosted a banquet to give them a farewell dinner.

There was an additional guest at the dinner that night: Big Sister Xiao, Xiao Huan, who had just returned from Lingnan. Xiao Xian's Left-field Marshal Zhang Xiu was unable to attend because just that morning he set out leading his army into battle.

As usual, the ten-thousand-kind flirtatious Big Sister Xiao was continuously throwing the two boys flirtatious glances and raining them with sweet talks [orig. 'confusing soup'].

After saluting them with a round of drink, Xiao Xian said, "Turned out the person who mounted sneak attack on Ziling to give Pei Yan the opportunity to escape was Bai Wen yuan, a newly rising martial art master of Jingjian Zong [lit. clean/net sword school], who is also Zhu Mei's current lover [orig. handsome male companion, *i.e.* gigolo]. He is quite famous in Sichuan region, it could be that he is infatuated by Zhu Mei's beauty that he came to take refuge in Zhu Can."

Kou Zhong blurted out laughing; he said, "Current lover. The term Xiao Dangjia used is definitely top-notch; it clearly showed that Zhu Mei used to have numerous lovers [here the term is 'adventurous head', also in subsequent paragraphs]. Ha!"

Big Sister Xiao glowered at him and said, "Being Zhu Mei's lover is not a good thing, because she is paranoid and jealous; if she suspected her lover was having affair with different women, she would not hesitate to kill him to vent her anger. That's the reason Jianghu people call her 'Poisonous Spider'. Obviously Bai Wen yuan dislike having long life that he attaches himself to her."

Xiang Yushan laughed and said, "That kind of heavily-made-up person, how

could two Dage have any regards for him? But Zhu Mei is indeed highly capable; rumor has it that she has mastered 90% of Zhu Can's skill. That night she did not fight back, simply because she was intimidated by two Dage's fame for fighting prowess after you killed Ren Shaoming, plus she was unclear of the situation, hence she could only flee."

Susu said anxiously, "Since she is a narrow-minded person, certainly she would not want to let this matter rest; you two must be absolutely careful."

Yun Yuzhen said with a laugh, "Su Jie please set your heart at ease. Talking about wisdom and strategy, Xiao Zhong, Xiao Ling, are definitely not inferior to anybody. Su Jie just think, ever since their debut, the ones suffering losses were other people, when did they ever any suffer defeat?"

Big Sister Xiao laughed like a fluttering stem of flower; she said, "Since Yun Bangzhu is able to say such thing, surely you have suffered losses in the hands of these two boys!"

Yun Yuzhen's pretty face blushed like red clouds; casting a flirtatious glance toward the two boys, she said, "Dajie has never tasted any losses from them!"

Seeing she blatantly flirted with the two boys during the banquet, Susu was displeased, her jet-black eyebrows were knitted.

Xiao Xian also felt rather uncomfortable with his younger sister's licentious behavior; changing the topic, he said, "There is one thing that even now I still don't understand: how did two Xiaodi find out that Zhu Mei and Shen Faxing were hiding in ambush outside the city? They are all old hands in Jianghu; they even managed to keep our people in the dark."

Naturally Kou Zhong would not divulge the fact that Xu Ziling possessed a supernatural intuition; inventing crazy nonsense, he said, "That was a pure speculation. Funny thing is that at first we did not know it was them; we were looking for Evil Monk and Amorous Nun, but found them by mistake. Just consider it their bad luck, ha!"

Xiang Yushan smiled and said, "This Kou Dage of mine often downplays their

achievements, but always speaks cheerfully and wittily, so that with him around, the atmosphere is always full of joy.”

Big Sister Xiao could not help asking in bewilderment, “Why is it that talking to the left General Xiang calls Kou Dage, talking to the left you calls Xu Dage? In term of age, you are older, in term of relationship, you are their jiefu [older sister’s husband]. And Su Jie, why didn’t you correct him?”

Susu happily said, “My two Didi are not ordinary people, naturally Yushan wants to show his respect!”

Yun Yuzhen also smiled and said, “Therefore, I also feel that Yushan did not use incorrect appellation.”

Xiao Xian chuckled, “Well said,” he said, “Two Xiaodi are indeed not ordinary people that I, Xiao Xian, seldom encounter in my life; people who, opening up their palm they create clouds, turning down their palm they create rain, who, leisurely and casually, turned the entire situation of the South upside-down, who also caused our Great Liang kingdom’s power and influence to flourish greatly. Although you have not officially joined my army, I, Xiao Xian, already consider you one of my own.”

And then, clapping his hands he called out, “People!”

While everybody else was stunned, two beautiful maids carrying exquisitely embroidered cases, one long one short, appeared in front of the banquet table.

Xiao Xian signaled with his hand, the two maids separately presented the long case to Kou Zhong, and the short one to Xu Ziling.

After the maids withdrew, Xiao Xian cheerfully said, “Small gifts, not worth showing my respect. Gentlemen, please open the cases and take a look what’s inside.”

Kou Zhong opened his embroidered case. To his astonishment, it was a steel saber. At first glance it seemed to be an ordinary saber, nothing special about it.

But after careful look, whether it was the saber itself or the scabbard, although there was neither ornate decoration nor any other embellishment, there was some kind of ancient, simple yet elegant taste on it, so that nobody dared to despise it.

Watching Kou Zhong taking the saber out of the case, Xiao Xian's eyes emitted some kind of unfathomable gleam as he spoke softly, "This saber has no name, but it is said that it is a divine weapon from the ancient times, the steel quality is marvelous, the blade can emit faint yellow glow. Two hundred years ago it fell into the hands of the number one saber expert of the time, the 'Saber Overlord' Ling Shangren [term of respect to address Taoist Master]. Afterwards Ling Shangren retired from Jianghu, this saber also disappeared. Later on, after some twists and turns, it fell into my hands. Although I do not like to use saber, I do have special fondness toward it. Hence I have the intention to present it to Kou Xiaodi, to show my, Xiao Xian's sincerity and gratefulness."

'Ring!'

Kou Zhong pulled the saber off its scabbard.

Everybody focused their attention to look, but all was disappointed.

The saber blade was dull without any luster; where was the yellow glow Xiao Xian was talking about?

But suddenly the blade changed; although it was barely noticeable, there was no doubt a genuine soft yellow glow around it.

Xiao Xian laughed aloud and said, "Xiao Xiongdi is indeed the true owner of this saber; your true qi is able to incite this treasured saber's reaction. I have played with this saber thousands of times, but the blade has never displayed the yellow glow."

And thus everybody understood that in the past, when Ling Shangren was using the saber, his true qi must have brought out the strong yellow glow of the blade, but if anybody else picked up the saber, it was no more than an ordinary iron. They all could not help clicking their tongue in wonder.

Kou Zhong knew very well that Xiao Xian was trying to win him over, but still, he was quite delighted and said gratefully, "From now on, this saber will be called Moon in the Well. This kid bows to Xiao Dangjia for bestowing this gift."

Astonished, Xiao Xian asked, "The name Moon in the Well has a heavy Zen flavor in it; what's the story behind it?"

Kou Zhong replied perfunctorily, "I just saw a marvel in the well one night; nothing special about it."

Xiao Xian suddenly sighed and said, "In the past, my ancestor, Emperor Wu of Liang, Xiao Yan, loved to collect divine weapons. This saber cost him ten years of mental and physical efforts, he sent people on open enquiries and secret search, and went to the end of the world, before he had the destiny to obtain it. Afterwards the enemy troops broke the city defense, but because this treasure was hidden deep in underground storehouse, it was preserved."

Only then did everybody understand why he was having a reluctant-to-part expression on his face.

Curious, Susu said, "Xiao Ling, why don't you see what kind of treasure Xiao Dangjia is giving you?"

Xu Ziling picked the case and presented it back to Xiao Xian; he smiled and said, "I appreciate Xiao Dangjia's good intention, whatever it is inside the case must be a rare treasure of the world, but I am a kind of person who don't like to be concerned about worldly possession, and I do not wish to know what unfathomable mystery inside the box. I am asking for Xiao Dangjia's forgiveness."

Other than Kou Zhong, everybody else was surprised by Xu Ziling's refusal. However, instead of being astonished, Xiao Xian simply sighed and said, "Xu Xiongdi is independent and loves to travel alone, someday you will certainly become an exceptional and peculiar character. Not only Laofu [old man, referring to self] does not have the slightest displeasure, my heart is full of admiration instead."

Everybody present was quite moved by Xiao Xian's poise.

Wanting to steer the conversation away from the Moon in the Well, Kou Zhong changed the subject, "I wonder if Xiao Dangjia's meeting with Miss Song the other day went well?"

Xiao Xian nodded and said, "Arrangements are being made for me to meet with the 'Heavenly Saber' Song Que, I have always had high esteem toward him, Senior. If we can bring this matter to fruition, two Xiao Xiongdi's merit is great."

Aware that Xiao Xian would not reveal the details of their meeting, Kou Zhong changed the subject once again by talking about the current situation of the warlords vying for supremacy.

After the banquet, Big Sister Xiao unashamedly went back with them to the General Mansion. She was very passionate toward Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, and did not try to be discreet at all, so that Yun Yuzhen was pouting, and Susu was frowning deeply. But since they were aware that that was her nature, they were quite helpless to stop her.

In the inner hall they chatted about this and that for the whole sichen, and then, although she was unwilling, Susu had to remember about the baby in her womb and had to take her leave to return to her room and take a rest.

On the pretext that he had to accompany his tender wife, Xiang Yushan also seized that opportunity to take his leave; leaving Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling, Yun Yuzhen and Xiao Huan, whose flirtatiousness and charm penetrated the bones. Immediately the situation became awkward.

Xu Ziling rose up; with aloofness that push other people ten-thousand li away, he said, "I also have to take my leave, forgive me for not accompanying you, but I need to go back to my room to train, to deal with the travel tomorrow."

Kou Zhong also stood up, but before he even had a chance to speak, Big Sister Xiao already spoke crossly, "We are just having interesting conversation here, how could you slip away just like that? Hee! How about Dajie and you go to your

room and have some drinks?”

After sending him a ‘my deep regret, but Xiaodi is unable to help however much I would like to’ look, Xu Ziling hurriedly slipped away.

Kou Zhong noticed that Yun Yuzhen was fuming with anger while hanging her head down. For the first time in his life he envied Xu Ziling’s ‘no woman is important’ view; with a wry smile he said, “If I don’t train but drinking and be merry all night with you, two beautiful women, the day after tomorrow you will forever not see me, this ‘the will is there, but not the strength’ [idiom from Confucian Analects] kid.”

Early morning the next day, when the sky has not even brightened, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling left Baling. Together with Duan Yucheng, Bao Zhifu, Shi Jie and Ma Gui, four men, driving four mule carts loaded with salt, crossing the river to the north, starting their long journey.

Their first destination was Jingling Prefecture by Han River.

Learning from experience, this time they did not take the waterway, but opted for land route instead, which was more convenient to cover their tracks.

By dusk, they stopped and pitched camp in the wilderness, while letting their mules to enjoy the beautiful grass around.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling sat down on underbrush by a pile of rocks. The former sighed and said, “Xiao Xian is really formidable; he could eat people without spitting their bones.”

Xu Ziling lifted up his eyes toward the towering, steep mountain peaks vying to be the most beautiful, beyond the plain, which, under the glow of the setting sun, gave him some kind of elusive immortality feeling. Sighing with Kou Zhong, he said, “With Su Jie in his hands, he does not need to be afraid we are going to take him down. If Xiang kid married Su Jie for the sake of ‘Duke Yang Treasure’, I will be the first who is going to take his little life away.”

Grabbing his own head, Kou Zhong said distressingly, "This is more formidable than threatening Su Jie with a saber. Let's forget about Xiang kid treating us with deferential respect, the fact is that he is most probably more cunning than the two of us put together. To say the least, we have absolutely no way to take him down."

Xu Ziling's countenance sank; he said slowly, "If we meet Li Jing someday, I will certainly ask him why he let down Su Jie's affection toward him. Were it not for Su Jie, he would have lost his life in the South."

Shaken, Kou Zhong said, "Xiao Ling, this is the first time that you addressed him directly by his name."

Xu Ziling's palm struck a hundred-jin rock by his side.

'Bang!'

The rock crumbled immediately.

While Kou Zhong was staring at him, tongue-tied, Xu Ziling let out a heavy sigh and said, "Why is it that there are so many things in the world that we know that it should not be like that, but we are helpless to do anything about it?"

Kou Zhong hung his head down in silence, engrossed in his own thought.

That night the two boys simply sat like that until dawn.

Early the following morning they continued their journey.

Two days later they entered the mountainous area.

Along the way the scenery was extremely beautiful. The mountain road was nestled among the dense forest, one segment of the roads overlooked a hundred-zhang deep ravine, while below the mountain was the panoramic view of rice fields and cultivated lands. When they reached certain elevation, their

eyes feasted on the range upon range of bluish-green, ten-thousand-hill going up and down as far as their eyes could see.

That night they pitched camp at the foot of the mountain.

Since that day when they sat staring blankly all night long, Xu Ziling was unusually silent. The two boys did not even sleep in the camp; instead, they stayed outside with the earth as their sleeping mat and the heavens as their bed curtain, as if they were back at the small valley where they buried Fu Junchuo.

Sometimes when Xu Ziling was sitting alone far away, Kou Zhong would chat with Duan Yucheng and the others.

Duan Yucheng respectfully said, "For the four of us to come with Zhong Ye and Ling Ye out to temper ourselves in the world, is truly a blessing. In just a short two-month period, it's like what other people would go through in several years; it is indeed eye-opening."

Bao Zhifu and the others nodded their agreement.

In order to avoid other people's eyes and ears, they agreed not to address the two boys as Gang Leaders.

Shi Jie also expressed his feelings, "No matter how bad the situation, as long as Zhong Ye and Ling Ye are around, we are always full of fighting spirit and vitality; and we have the confidence to cope with any danger."

Ma Gui joined in, "The hardest to come by is that the two masters have never treated us as underlings; moreover, you never put on airs."

Kou Zhong laughed nonchalantly and said, "Right now we all are brothers, hands and feet, together going out into the world. Not only to establish great undertaking that will last hundreds of generations, we are wishing to bring peace into the world, so that everybody can live in peace and work happily. Destiny is made whenever there is a will to create."

Hearing that, the four men seemed to be emotional and excited.

Shi Jie hatefully said, "What we detest the most is those dog officials and thieving soldiers; we want to kill them as many as possible without showing mercy."

Duan Yucheng suddenly hanged down his head, his shoulders twitched. Real men don't cry easily; evidently he had a very painful past.

Kou Zhong looked at him with astonishment; Ma Gui leaned over and whispered explanation on his ear, "Xiao Duan's fiancée was raped and murdered by the thief soldier; he always cries bitterly every time he remembers it."

Kou Zhong nodded sympathetically; reaching out, he put his hand on Duan Yucheng's shoulder and said, "Let bygone be bygone! Tomorrow is our hope. Our destiny should not be in other people's hands, but it ought to be in your hands and mine. Even if our heads are rolling away, our blood splatters; there will never be any regret."

Kou Zhong walked over and sat cross-legged next to Xu Ziling, who was lying down, looking up at the sky. When Kou Zhong also looked up, he saw black cloud was rolling in, covering most of the originally starry sky. Sighing, he said, "Looks like thunderstorm and heavy rain is coming!"

Xu Ziling remained silent.

Kou Zhong looked down and asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Xu Ziling sat up and spoke heavily, "I am remembering the days when we lived in that small valley where we buried Niang's bones. Supposing we never left, today there would not be that many people whose spirit disappear whose soul broken in pain. Aren't human beings always bringing trouble to themselves?"

A bean-size raindrop fell on the back of Kou Zhong's neck, and slipped into the collar of his clothes. As he looked up, a lightning happened to streak across the night sky, followed by the muffled sound of distant thunder, shattering the

tranquility of the mountain and fields, as if it was playing overture to the incoming storm.

Reaching out to Xu Ziling's shoulder, Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, "Fate does not have this 'if' syllable in it. What has happened has happened. Supposing we did not obtain the 'Secret to Long Life' by lucky coincidence, right now we would be facing different trouble and different pain; Yan Laoda would not have died and would continue abusing us, and we definitely would not have sat here waiting for the storm to come. Life is like that, Lao Daye [lit. old big master; another term for God] put you in such position, whether you want it or not, you simply must do your best to play that role."

'Crash!'

A crashing thunder was followed by a gale that swept the mountain and fields, and then the heavy rain was pouring from the sky.

Letting the rain drenching his entire body, Xu Ziling said in a low voice, "Since when did you believe in destiny?"

Revealing a hint of wry smile, Kou Zhong replied, "I only believe that everything that has happened was fate. As for the future, I believe our fate is in our hands. If we did not have this thought, how could there be any fighting spirit and meaning in the way we conduct ourselves?"

Xu Ziling nodded and said, "Since it is unknown, it does not exist. This is destiny's most captivating aspect. No matter what the future holds, we are going to challenge the future, to seek our own ideals."

Kou Zhong smiled, "Ha!" he said, "We'd better sing a song together in this dark and stormy night, in order to unfold the solemn and stirring feelings toward life in our hearts. Ling Shao, what is your respected opinion?"

Xu Ziling laughed aloud and pulled Kou Zhong up.

After exchanging a determined and full-of-passion glance, as if by prior

agreement, they both broke out in loud singing, “Deep in the mountains watching the heaven’s fate, everlasting thoughts appear one by one, since ancient times keep flourishing without end, heroes and sages are definitely able to strive ...”

The singing voice reverberated into the distance, even the thunderstorm could not cover it up the least bit. Duan Yucheng and the others heard the song, their heroic spirit was excited by this ode to their pride and longing.

The rain was growing more violent, but raging flames have already sparked off in their hearts, there was not even a shred of fear of the blowing and beating wind and rain.

The mule train passed through a valley, entering the plain southeast of Jingling city, gradually leaving the towering mountains and precipitous ridges behind. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling rode side-by-side ahead, acting as the vanguard of the mule train.

In these last ten days of travel, every body did not relax their guard, they forged ahead vigorously and worked very hard in training their martial art skill, so that they were ready to face the hard fighting that might come at any time.

Pointing to a small lake in the distance to their left, Xu Ziling said, “We’ll pitch camp by the lake tonight, plus we can take this opportunity to swim.”

Still sitting on the horseback, Kou Zhong was looking at the map Xiang Yushan gave them. Hearing Xu Ziling, he said, “By tomorrow afternoon we should reach Baizhang [lit. hundred-zhang] Gorge. This gorge extends as long as two li, with ten-thousand ren [not sure what it is, dictionary only says ‘measure’] steep cliffs on both sides. In some places we can only see a sliver of blue sky, there is even waterfall seemingly hanging down from empty air. It is an extremely strategic place. If anybody is going to ambush us over there, we can’t guarantee the safety of the mule carts.”

Xu Ziling was an animal lover; he laughed and said, “Tonight we’ll take a bath in the clear creek, and then we’ll go there to scout the route.”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Good idea!”

Patting the horse’s bottom, he galloped toward the small lake. Xu Ziling also urged his horse to pursue closely. Duan Yucheng and the others had no choice but to urge their mules to go faster toward their destination.

Wearing only shorts to cover his groin, Xu Ziling crawled up from the warm lake water, dripping wet. He turned around toward Kou Zhong, who was still floating face up, looking at the starry night sky, and said, “That treasured saber of yours that was given by the Old Xiao, why did you give up the name ‘Star Transformation’ and picked ‘Moon in the Well’ instead?”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “It’s because I want to let our Xu Ziling Gongzi to use the name ‘Star Transformation’!”

Xu Ziling sat down on a large rock and crossed his legs; he said crossly, “Please stop playing dumb in front of me, quickly explain the fact to this young master.”

Kou Zhong laughed to his heart’s content before saying, “The lost past has returned to me. This is one of the good times that I don’t mind you cursing me about. There is no harm in telling you. Ha! Moon in the Well is Star Transformation; Star Transformation is Moon in the Well. The next move in the Moon in the Well is changes; isn’t that Star Transformation? Do you understand?”

Xu Ziling was moved, “It does make sense a little bit. Very well! Scouting time is here; get out of there right now!”

Kou Zhong acknowledged the order; he jumped up ashore.

They dressed up using the fastest technique. After letting the four men know, they unleashed their shenfa using all their strength, flying toward the Baizhang Gorge.

Half a sichen later, the two boys already covered a distance of nearly twenty li, a clear indication that compared to before, their qinggong has enjoyed great

progress.

By this time an expanse of dense forest appeared before their eyes. Under the dark night, where the moon and the stars did not show their splendor, from the outside, the forest looked gloomy and mysterious.

The two boys' childish heart was greatly aroused; as soon as they entered the forest, they jumped onto the tree branches and leaves with great delight.

As they swept through the forest, they saw dots of flames outside the forest, while also heard the sound of fighting.

Greatly astonished, the boys stopped by the edge of the forest and looked out.

Outside the forest, far into the distance across the plain, was a row of towering mountains and precipitous ridges; the space in between as undulating hills and mounds and sparse woodlands. This moment the flames were flickering; several hundreds torches covered the hills and plains as two groups cavalries were engaged in life and death battle.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other; what was happening out there?

Xu Ziling breathed out a mouthful of cold air, "They are completely blocking the way to Baizhang Gorge. Shall we continue on our mission, or shall we turn around and go back to sleep?"

Focusing his power into his eyes, Kou Zhong turned his gaze to the two groups of riders fighting at close quarters about two li outside the forest. "Did you see that?" he said, "There is a yellow lantern hung high right in the middle of the battlefield, it hangs from a wooden post on an elevated platform. There seem to be several more things hanging from the post, and there seem to be someone tied at the bottom of the post."

Xu Ziling nodded, "And that person is wearing yellow clothes," he added, "Could it be that these two groups are fighting a life and death battle over that person?"

Kou Zhong's heart was unbearably itchy; he said, "If I don't go to the bottom of this, how can I sleep tonight? Let's go!"

Xu Ziling's curiosity was greatly aroused; he followed Kou Zhong rushing toward the platform.

The closer they got, the louder was the battle cry; they were also able to see more clearly the two groups of rider in close combat. The torches were strewn at random, some were stuck on the ground, some were tied on the trees. The closer to the platform, there were more torches and placed more closely to each other.

By this time the two boys were able to see clearly that one group of riders wore non-Han attire; obviously they were not people from the Central Earth. On the other hand, the other group was wearing black, tight warrior attire, so that the two groups were in stark contrast to each other [orig. like rivers Jing and Wei separate clearly]. Quite naturally, the two boys' heart was leaning toward the black-clad warriors' side.

The situation on the elevated platform was even clearer, the person who was bound on the post was a woman wearing yellow clothes, her long cloud-like beautiful hair was loose, covering most of her face, so that nobody could see her jade countenance clearly.

The warriors in barbarian clothes were blocking the black-clad warriors from attacking the platform, and they clearly were gaining the upper hand.

The black-clad warriors numbered more than a thousand, more than twice the number of barbarian warriors; however, the barbarian warriors had the advantage of stronger martial art, so that they were successful in holding the enemy at bay.

From time to time the sword's qi and the saber's shine reflected the torch's flame that it looked like dots of continuously jumping will-o'-the-wisp, giving the out-of-the-world impression from the stark horror of the battle.

The fighting was spread over a large area. Although it was concentrated mainly around the platform, but there were fierce battle everywhere they looked. This group chased that group pursued; it was an extremely bitter fighting.

Forced at the edge of the battlefield was a group of five, six black-clad warriors, surrounded by a crowd of more than a dozen barbarian warriors. Sabers flashed and men fell down.

Witnessing this view, the two boys' blood was boiling in their breast; feeling of solidarity and anger against foreign enemy burst forth in their heart.

'Qiang!'

Kou Zhong drew the Moon in the Well out and strode forward. Without saying anything, Xu Ziling followed close by his side.

Soon enough the dozen or so barbarian warriors discovered these two intruders' presence. With eyes gleaming with ominous glint they swarmed toward the newcomers.

There was only about a hundred zhang or so battlefield separating this corner from the elevated platform. The black-clad warriors were in absolute disadvantage; not only they were unable to maintain their formation, they were beaten so bad that everything broken and in disorder, giving the enemy one opportunity after another to strike at their core strength.

As the enemy arrived, like torrential rush spears, hatchets, sabers and halberds also swarmed in. Kou Zhong quickened his steps. Shaking the Moon in the Well in his hand, instantly the saber blade emitted yellow glow so strong that even the enemy blocking him was aware of it.

Like flashes of lightning he swept to the left and hacked to the right, accurately striking the enemy's blade and their bodies, so that two men were killed instantly.

The most shocking thing was that unlike before, where as they were hit by the

saber they would drop their weapons and fell down, the dead bodies stayed still, their weapons fell down first, and then like snapping pillars the bodies suddenly collapsed.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly amazed. It was only then did they realize that this blunt, ordinary-looking saber was actually a divine weapon with unmatched sharp blade.

The rest of the barbarians only saw two flashes of yellow light, and immediately two of their men were killed on the spot under such a strange, baffling circumstances. Without exception everybody's guts suffered severe blow, thinking that who could possibly withstand such saber technique, where they could not even see how it happened? Immediately their will to fight was gone, and they all scattered in all directions.

Kou Zhong pulled the saber back and scrutinized it under his eyes. Standing proudly, he ran his fingers along the blade and said with a sigh, "From now on, other than Xu Ziling, you are my best companion. By no means, don't let down my, Kou Zhong's high expectation on you!"

This moment, another group of barbarian warriors was charging toward them, but acting as if he did not see them, Xu Ziling remained standing by Kou Zhong's side and said, "Do you realize that before the blade even reached the enemy, the saber qi has already preceded the saber in invading their body and controlling their channels so that they obediently waited for death."

Kou Zhong nodded, indicating that he was aware of it, but then he said in distress, "In your opinion, was it because of my power has increased greatly, or was it entirely due to this amazing saber?"

Three iron spears were thrust swiftly toward them.

Without even looking, Kou Zhong took a step forward, the Moon in the Well swiped toward the enemy, saber's ray swirling, yellow glow suddenly stormed, three spears met the saber and broke, scaring the three spear wielders that they staggered and fell, battered and exhausted.

Two other foreign bandits were still heroically defying death by charging in, each one had a pair of hatchets in their hands. Kou Zhong casually turned his saber around, like a violent lightning yellow light flashed, the two enemies' hatchets flew from their hands while they themselves died on the spot.

The rest of the enemies dispersed in confusion.

As if he was not aware the enemies had just attacked, Xu Ziling diplomatically replied, "I think it was both. Watching you making your move these two times, I could tell there was a bit of Yijian Technique feel in it, in a sense that you were able to anticipate the next bestowing-death-to-the-enemy move's change one step ahead, pressuring the enemy that they were unable to change their move to counter, so much so that their acute spirit disappeared completely; otherwise, how could they be that useless?"

Kou Zhong sighed, "Ay!" he said, "If only Ba Fenghan, Yang Xuyan, or the likes of them were here, I could have tested my saber to my heart's content!"

This scene was extremely weird.

All around the cry of killing reached the sky, saber light and sword shadow everywhere, but it was as if the two boys were talking a leisure stroll over to this place, chatting idly discussing martial arts.

Xu Ziling suddenly traversed sideways, with a lightning move of the hand he snatched one saber and one sword that sneakily attacked them from behind. His legs kicked twice, while at the same time throwing the saber and the sword in his hands, four foreign bandits were eliminated immediately. Momentarily no one else dared to mess with them.

Returning to Kou Zhong's side, Xu Ziling elbowed his flank and said with a laugh, "Don't forget you still have me as your competitor. Bring it on! Let me see if after obtaining the Moon in the Well, whether you become like a tiger that has grown wings, or like a mouse that has grown a tumor?"

While crying out in pain, Kou Zhong struck a posture, and with a squeal said, "Lately you, this kid, have been admonishing me with straight face. This time I

am going to repay injustice with injustice, animosity with animosity. En garde!”

However, the saber was hacking toward a young, heroic barbarian man, who pounced on them.

‘Clang!’

Unexpectedly that man used his sword to block Kou Zhong’s Moon in the Well, and was still able to fiercely launch a counterattack. The swordsmanship was swift and fierce, strange and mysterious, the power behind it profound. Obviously this was a martial art masters from the barbarian bandits’ side who heard about the newcomers and had come to his companions’ aid.

Forgetting about Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong swiftly traversed sideways, thick fantastic yellow glow arose, like the billows of Yangtze River it met the incoming attack.

The man blocked seven saber strikes in succession.

‘Dang!’

Unexpectedly his sword broke right in the middle.

Kou Zhong’s Moon in the Well seized this opportunity to advance, but the man was indeed brilliant; right in time he produced a dagger.

‘Ding!’

The dagger blocked the definite-kill saber strike, while, borrowing the momentum from the impact, he floated about a zhang back.

By this time Xu Ziling was also heavily surrounded, but he still called out, “I want to see something!” His fist and his leg moved together, he simply fought his way out, and rushed in the direction of the elevated platform.

When Kou Zhong wanted to run after him, shadows flashed in front of him, as three men barred his way, one of them happened to be the barbarian with superior skill, holding a fresh sword in his hand.

The young barbarian shouted, “Friend, who are you? Your skill is quite exceptional, what relationship do you have with Duba [lit. sole hegemony/dominator] Village [orig. mountain village/villa/manor]?”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud. “What Duba Village?” he replied, “I have never heard of it. I am who I am and I'm not ashamed of my name: Kou Zhong it is. Where have thou cometh from? Why had the guts to come to my Central Earth and display shockingly bad behavior?”

Hearing Kou Zhong’s name, the three barbarians’ countenance changed.

Astonished, Kou Zhong asked, “Do you know me?”

The barbarian that had just exchanged blows with Kou Zhong replied, “I am Tiele’s ‘Flying Eagle’, Qu Ao’s third disciple Genggehu’er. Kou Zhong, this time you dropped by, don’t ever think that you’ll leave alive. Go!”

The two barbarians behind him immediately fanned out and surrounded Kou Zhong in the middle.

Kou Zhong shrugged his shoulders and laughed, “Turns out Ren Shaoming was indeed your man. Since my hands are unbearably itchy, and now you are here to offer yourselves as sacrifice for my saber! Ha!”

When Xu Ziling was breaking through layers upon layers of the enemy’s network of defense, burst after burst of shrill whistling sound was heard from the battlefield; there must be some sort of pattern and order, commanding the barbarians’ advance and retreat, because he suddenly felt increasing pressure from the enemy.

However, the two boys have obviously impeded the Tiele troops’ main force, giving big boost to the black-clad warriors’ momentum, so that they launched

wave after wave of attacks toward the elevated platform.

Xu Ziling has entered the as-clear-as-still-water state of mind; although all around him was chaotic battle and tangled fighting, but he was able to clearly grasp what was true and what was false in both the enemy's and his own side's movements, and was always a step ahead in evading or intercepting the enemies, so that they were unable to surround him.

The black-clad warriors have also regarded him as an ally; every now and then they helped him blocking the Tiele people's attack against him.

By the time he was about ten zhang away from the elevated platform, a charming shout came from above.

Xu Ziling quickly recognized her as a first-class martial art masters from the enemy's side; thereupon he also let out a ferocious shout and soared into the air.

Under the illumination of the torches, he saw a pair of milky-white arms, round navel, belonging to a beautiful woman in red dress, whose pair of short blades in her right and left hands turned into two balls of sharp-flame-like flashes of light, one on top of the other, striking toward his face and chest; unbelievably fast, and swift and fierce to the extreme.

The woman's silhouette was very pretty, her features were so clear and distinct that it was as if she was carved by a sharp knife, her pair of beautiful eyes sparkled spiritedly like precious stones; in short, she was extremely attractive.

But Xu Ziling did not pay the slightest bit of attention to her beauty, one after another his left and right palms struck out.

'Bang! Bang!'

By the time the two combatants were interlocked with each other and then separated, they had already exchanged three moves.

Xu Ziling had used a carefully calculated force, so that to her surprise, he was able to utilize the reaction force from the impact to propel himself up, and like a big bird he flew toward the elevated platform.

Obviously the beautiful barbarian had never expected that not only Xu Ziling was able to meet her full-powered, swift and fierce move head-on, he was able to brilliantly borrow the force to fly upwards swiftly. By the time she wanted to run after him, it was already too late.

Book 8 Chapter 10 – Siren Or Saint?

Kou Zhong's Moon in the Well was like a storm filling the sky; when he warded off the two broadswords from his left and right, Qu Ao's third disciple Genggehu'er stepped over in large stride, thrusting the sword in his hand straight toward Kou Zhong's face. Before the sword even arrived, cold air already shrouded the entire area in front of Kou Zhong.

Kou Zhong knew that this one sword strike carried Genggehu'er's entire strength, taking advantage while he was blocking his two subordinates' attack, he watched for a gap in Kou Zhong's defense and went straight in; it was an unusually formidable attack. However, Kou Zhong felt immense delight instead; his saber swiftly moved to parry the sword.

Yellow light flashed everywhere, carrying with it an ear-splitting noise.

Kou Zhong concentrated his strength as he stood still like a mountain, while Genggehu'er subsequently took two steps back.

Two sabers attacked again, making it difficult for Kou Zhong to pursue and attack.

Although these two Tiele martial art masters' skill was exquisite, Kou Zhong knew that if fighting one-on-one, he would be able to subdue any of them within three moves. However, when the two men joined hands and fought together, in terms of timing and angle of attack, they prevented him from dealing with just one of them with all his strength; therefore, he was feeling that he had the power but could not carry out his attack. Also, obviously the two men were using some kind of mysterious fighting technique, so that by fighting together, the two of them would be able to deal with a much stronger opponent.

However, Kou Zhong remained calm without any sign of fear; his heroic spirit was swelling. Weaving left and right, his shenfa was as fantastic as swimming fish, as he dodged the enemy's sabers.

'Whoosh!'

Genggehu'er's sword pierced; just like before, the sword went straight toward Kou Zhong's head.

Although it was an incomparably simple sword strike, Kou Zhong felt helpless to evade, hence he sent his Moon in the Well to strike back.

'Dang!'

The yellow light from Kou Zhong's Moon in the Well intensified as he blocked the enemy's sword once again.

This time Genggehu'er was shaken and had to take three steps back, but Kou Zhong was also forced to take half a step back.

Both men were shocked.

Kou Zhong's shock was because he felt that for no reason at all Genggehu'er's power suddenly increased; it was far stronger than the first one, so that his own qi and blood was churning. If the power behind the next sword strike increased proportionately, it would be strange indeed if Kou Zhong were not defeated.

Genggehu'er's shock was because of Kou Zhong's resilience. It should be noted that his so-called 'Seven-Turn of Violent Wave' was his school's unique skill, one of the Three Amazing Skills created by Qu Ao himself. Each strike was capable of absorbing a little of the opponent's power, and turned it to enhance the power of his own sword; it was an extremely strange and crafty skill. Who would have thought that not only Kou Zhong's power was well stored-up and did not leak at all, it was also incomparably cold? Although he barely managed to suck in a bit of breath, he was actually feeling incomparable discomfort, so that the second time

he exchanged blows, he was forced to take one step more than the first.

It was only then did he realize why with his ability, Qu Te, who assumed the name Ren Shaoming, still had to succumb under the opponent's saber.

This moment Kou Zhong heard the sound of saber blade splitting the air behind him. His mind was churning at the speed of light, he knew that if this situation continued, he would be stuck in a completely passive situation where he was at the enemy's mercy; so he cooked up an action plan.

Following his body, the saber in Kou Zhong's hand also spun around, seemingly blocking the saber attacking from his left. But suddenly he crabbed sideways to face the saber chopping down from his right. Exuding a strong qi, the Moon in the Well sliced diagonally at the enemy.

The Tiele master felt the yellow glow from the opponent's strange saber suddenly flared up, the saber qi rushed down directly at him with a 'magnificent army with thousands of men and horses' power. Scared out of his wits, he stopped right on his track, not knowing whether to advance or to retreat.

The originally invulnerable fighting formation immediately revealed a gap, which ought not to be revealed.

With a long laugh Kou Zhong suddenly straightened up his waist and back, his bearing became even more intimidating without equal; his confidence soared. Like a thunderbolt the Moon in the Well struck down on the Tiele master.

'Dang!'

The man raised his saber to block. Who would have thought that with a yellow flash, Kou Zhong's saber chopped down on both the saber and the man, throwing him outward, that he breathed his last even before his body touched the ground?

By this time, Genggehu'er had just managed to regulate his qi, indicating the intensity and the swiftness of the fight between these four men. Upon seeing

this, he was greatly alarmed. Immediately he stepped forward and hacked down his earth-shattering third surge of violent wave.

Meanwhile, the situation at the battlefield intensified, the fighting was concentrated around the elevated platform. There was continuous flow of people splashing their blood and falling to the ground, it was an extremely bitter fight.

Another sword attacked from the left side.

Kou Zhong struck a pose as if he was going to block; the Moon in the Well feigned a strike, but when the enemy's sword was about to arrive, he shifted half a step sideways. The enemy's sword flit across right in front of his nose; a hairsbreadth closer and his body would be cut open.

Effortlessly the Moon in the Well swiped horizontally sideways.

'Dang!'

The martial art master was jolted by him that he spurted a mouthful of blood. He staggered back, and momentarily had no more power to attack.

Having the pressure on him reduced, Kou Zhong let out a long laugh and took a stride forward. The Moon in the Well shook, like raging wave crashing onto the shore it attacked Genggehu'er.

For Genggehu'er, it was the very first time that he encountered someone who was able to overcome his 'Seven-Turn of Violent Wave' by receiving it head-on. His courage was shaken, unexpectedly he did not dare to take the saber, but flew back instead.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud. He did not pursue, but went toward Xu Ziling to provide support.

Xu Ziling had just landed on the edge of the elevated platform. Over a dozen Tiele people guarding the platform divided themselves into two groups. One

group swarmed forward to intercept, the other group positioned themselves around the post where the woman in yellow was held captive, tightly defending this ultimate target.

Xu Ziling knew that if he failed to use lightning fast trick to knock down the Tiele people guarding this last defensive line, if that Tiele beauty had time to rush over, forget about saving people, there would be no guarantee that he could save his own life.

Not to mention that the Tiele people currently attacking him obviously had significantly superior martial art skill compared to the Tiele warriors he encountered in the battlefield a moment ago, especially the huge man in the middle wielding a spear. Before the spear even arrived, the spear qi was already pressing down on him, powerful and harsh to the extreme.

Not daring to underestimate the enemy, he soared to the air. As he reached approximately three-zhang altitude, unexpectedly he was able to apply his qi to make a somersault toward the wooden pole in the middle of the platform.

The Tiele people underneath had never expected that Xu Ziling would be as nimble as an eagle in the air, and was able to flip over and fly. Momentarily they were caught off-guard and their formation became chaotic. The worst thing was that Xu Ziling was able to borrow the reaction force as he made contact with the post, and would be able to land anywhere he wished, so that they were unable to anticipate how to guard against him, and thus were at a loss on what to do.

As they were still thinking about it, Xu Ziling struck the pole with his palm, grabbed it, and slid down the pole. With unequalled ferocity his qi pressed down on the heads of the six Tiele warriors guarding around the pole.

This time, even if they wanted to kill the beauty tied on the pole, they did not have the ability to do so.

Amidst the tender shout, the outstanding Tiele beauty has arrived on the platform. But the wooden post suddenly disintegrated into cun-size fragments.

It was only then did the enemy realize that it was the handicraft of Xu Ziling's

palm. Even more, they now realized how formidable Xu Ziling's palms were.

But the realization came too late.

The beauty in yellow was suddenly loosened from the pole, but as she was falling backward, Xu Ziling caught her. Soaring at an angle to the sky, he let out a long whistle, calling out to Kou Zhong, who had just caught up with him on the stage, to leave together.

With Kou Zhong leading the way and Xu Ziling carrying the woman in yellow, they ran for more than twenty li at a stretch before reaching a small hill and came to a halt.

Setting down the lady in yellow on the grass, Xu Ziling knitted his brows. "That's weird," he said, "Her acupoints must be sealed; but no matter how I sent my qi to stimulate her blood flow, she remains unconscious."

Copying him, Kou Zhong also squatted on the ground. As he reached out to push aside her beautiful hair, the two boys were dumbstruck.

My Niang! How could there be such a classy, stirring beautiful woman like this in the world? If behind her closed eyelids she had beautiful eyes that matched her exceptional flower-like countenance, then those beauties like Song Yuzhi, Shen Luoyan, Shan Wanjing and the likes would have to yield to her somewhat.

Staring at her figure, which was as elegant as the undulating mountains and rivers, her skin and flesh, which was as sparkling and translucent as the snow, so smooth and supple [orig. brimming with elastic energy], Kou Zhong breathed a mouthful of cold air and said, "Beauty that is capable of causing the downfall of a country is probably no more than this. No wonder those two troops were fighting a life and death battle over her."

Xu Ziling took a deep breath and said, "Looking at her jet-black hair, her snow white skin, I feel like this is how the beauty of the nature ought to look like. I have never seen such beautiful, captivating hair and icy muscle; so beautiful that it is almost unnatural."

Kou Zhong responded in amazement, “You are right. But when I see beautiful women, usually my heart warms up, how come just now there was a chill in my heart?”

Xu Ziling looked at her from head to toe, but was unable to find on this incomparably well-proportioned figure anything that was enough to spoil her perfect and without the least bit of blemish body; on the contrary, the more he looked at her, the more he felt that she had a hard-to-describe, the kind that borders magical, out-of-this-world, beauty.

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Could it be that she is basically not a human? Looking at her along, looking at her across, she looks more like a fairy than human; how could a human be this beautiful?”

Xu Ziling’s voice turned cold, “You seem to forget why you squatted down to examine her!”

It was only then did Kou Zhong remember that he was supposed to find a way to unseal her acupoints. Embarrassed, he said, “It was because her beauty is too shaking to the core. Huh? How come your countenance is so unsightly?”

Touching his face, Xu Ziling pondered and said, “Perhaps because when I was trying to unseal her acupoints just now I used too much true qi!”

Kou Zhong secretly signaled Xu Ziling with his eyes, but his mouth said, “That must be it!”

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were connected at a deep level; standing up, he said, “Let me look around to see if there is any enemy pursuing us. You stay here and think of a way to wake her up!”

How could Kou Zhong not understand his meaning? He also stood up and said, “It’s better for us to look together!” Reaching out to Xu Ziling’s shoulders, he sent his true qi into Xu Ziling’s channels.

The two boys distanced themselves from the peerless beauty for at least thirty

zhang before Kou Zhong said in low voice, “Extremely not right. Before, even after fighting with all your might, your countenance would not turn white suffused with green, and only after I transmitted my true qi the green disappeared.”

Xu Ziling nodded and said, “This woman not only has scary beauty, even her person is very scary; I seem to hit the right spot, but how could there be any acupoint sealing technique that we cannot unseal? Could it be that the person sealing her acupoint is stronger than Ba Fenghan? That’s impossible.”

Kou Zhong replied with a wry smile, “If the person sealing her acupoint was Qu Ao? Don’t forget that Qu Ao is just a tad inferior to Bi Xuan.”

“Have you come across Qu Ao?” Xu Ziling blurted out.

Kou Zhong was upset, “If I have come across Qu Ao, do you think I would still be alive and debate with you in here whether we should help this siren [see chapter title’s footnote]? Ay! Such a beautiful siren, she made me feel that even if I was killed by her, I would be most willing.”

Noticing Xu Ziling’s ferocious stare, he busily added, “Those bunch just now are Qu Ao’s men; that guy wielding a sword, and his skill in using the sword is not bad, called himself Qu Ao’s third disciple Genggehu’er. The other side was Duba Village. Just listening to the name, I know they are not good people.” [Reminder: duba means sole hegemony/domination.]

Frowning, Xu Ziling said, “Why would they fight over this siren?”

Kou Zhong shook his head, indicating that he had no idea. Wrapping his arm around Xu Ziling’s shoulders, he took him down the sloping hill and said, “Looking at her eerie beauty, I was having a panic-stricken feeling. Perhaps femme fatales are this kind of touching rarity. Tell me, have you ever imagined that there are women more beautiful than Shan Wanjing, Shen Luoyan, Li Xiuning, and the likes?”

Xu Ziling shook his head, indicating that he had not. Agreeing with him, he said, “Our only option is: if everything else fails, retreat! Huh? How come you are

walking slower and slower?”

Kou Zhong sat down dejectedly. Holding his head in his hands, he said, “Xiao Ling! Tell me! Supposing we are actually good people who acted like thieves, that Miss is blameless, but because we are overly suspicious, we let her be captured back by Tiele people, or perhaps be eaten by wild beasts, would there be peace in happiness in our conscience?”

At a loss, Xu Ziling also sat down on another rock at the bottom of the hill; he said, “But how do you explain why my face was turning green then?”

Kou Zhong asked, “Before you rescued her, did you clash with any formidable opponent?”

Xu Ziling nodded, “I encountered that Tiele beauty who wields double-dagger,” he replied, “But she is not yet qualified to injure me.”

“Qu Ao’s martial art is strange,” Kou Zhong said, “Take Genggehu’er for example, he was able to use strange technique to enhance his strength. Perhaps that Tiele beauty injured you surreptitiously. Therefore, there is still the possibility that we wrongly accused her as a siren.”

Taking a deep breath, Xu Ziling said, “She is either a weak woman who does not know any martial art, or her martial art skill is so superior that we can’t even detect the true qi within her body. Ay! I don’t know how to deal with her either.”

Having a second thought, Kou Zhong said, “According to reason, this can’t be a trap set for us, because how could she know that we were going to rescue her?”

“But why do we feel that something is not right?” Xu Ziling mused.

Kou Zhong rose up and said resolutely, “Let’s come back to take a look first before we talk further.”

The mysterious, captivating beauty was still lying without moving on the grass. This moment the black clouds have already past, the stars filled the sky, her

brilliance was even more mysterious and enchanting.

Suddenly there were wolves howling in the distance, it was unclear whether they smelled the reeking of blood from the battlefield and thus were flocking there.

The two boys hid behind a bush, hesitating.

Since their debut, it was the first time that they were caught in this kind of dilemma, where there was no room to advance or retreat.

Staring at her undulating, alluring soft breasts, Kou Zhong spoke softly, "Looking at her face, she could not be more than twenty. Even if her Shifu was Bi Xuan or Fu Cailin, it's hard to imagine that her power cultivation is deep enough that she is able to conceal it from us."

Sneering, Xu Ziling remarked, "Unless she is another Shi Feixuan ... heavens ...!"

The two boys were shaken. It was indeed a possibility.

Kou Zhong said in low voice, "My granny! If she is a direct-line disciple of Yin Gui Pai sent out to have a duel with Shi Feixuan, everything becomes clear."

Xu Ziling spoke in heavy voice, "That possibility is high. Ren Shaoming is Qu Ao's son, Evil Monk and Amorous Nun are Yin Gui Pai people; otherwise, why would they tie her to a post and just waiting for us to rescue her?"

Kou Zhong nodded, "That must be it," he said, "Let's go! I want to see how long she is going to lie down over there."

Nonetheless, the two boys were only speaking without actually doing it; they did not leave.

Suddenly a wolf was howling nearby. The two boys' heart was still on the woman in yellow, they jumped in fright immediately.

Several hungry wolves were running up the hillside. Seeing the woman in yellow, immediately their eyes brightened and rushed over toward her.

The beautiful woman remained motionless. The two boys were unable to hold back; they rushed out to drive the hungry wolves away.

After so much hard work, they finally assembled a stretcher from tree branches and vines. It was a cumbersome process, but in order not to touch her body, even if they had to spend more time, they would still have to do it.

They were very much in fear. With utmost care and full alert, they finally managed to move her soft, as if it had no bones, and alluring body onto the stretcher. Only then did they breathe a sigh of relief.

Smiling wryly, Kou Zhong said, "Let's bring her back first and talk about it later!"

The two boys lifted up the stretcher, and then ran as fast as they could.

Book 8 Chapter 11 – I, Your Servant, Wanwan

Urging his horse, Kou Zhong caught on to Xu Ziling's side, who was riding ahead of him; he said, "She is not awake yet. If she continues without water, in a few days this jade woman will perish."

Xu Ziling turned his head around to cast a quick glance on the mule cart, which was specially equipped with a canopy to shield her from the sun, suddenly his face showed a little smile as he spoke indifferently, "Zhong Shao, have you noticed that both in terms of breathing and pulse, the frequency and amplitude are unswerving from start to finish. In my opinion, this is some kind of first-class, very exquisite Gui Xi Gong [lit. turtle breathing skill]. I dare to say that she must be the Yin Gui Pai ambassador sent out to deal with Shi Feixuan."

Deeply vexed, Kou Zhong gloomily said, "Last night, if we were willing to let the hungry wolves ate her, we would have found the truth. But I was afraid we might make one mistake and regret it for all eternity by harming other people's little live due to our overly suspicious thought of some demonic character."

Although all around them the wilderness was full of rustic charms, with floating mist, luxuriant forest, a truly poetic and picturesque beauty, but with this load of worry in their mind, the two boys were not in the mood to enjoy the scenery.

Kou Zhong went on, "Supposing she is really a Yin Gui Pai siren, she could simply join hands with Qu Ao to give us bad luck; why would she go to a lot of trouble 'dressing up as God, playing the devil' on us?"

Xu Ziling replied seriously, "It seems to me that her beauty has gradually conquered you; otherwise, why would keep speaking in defense of her? Don't

you forget that things of the world often come as a surprise; for example, she might want to lure us to unseal her acupoints, and then uses some evil method to absorb our power; or perhaps she wanted to break the secret of our fantastic power cultivation, so that she could use it to increase her own power to defeat Shi Feixuan. Who would dare to ascertain that these possibilities are invalid?”

Grumbling to himself, Kou Zhong said, “How could I be conquered or confused that easily by her? But after seeing her, Duan Yucheng those four guys have become dazed; this is what worries me!”

Xu Ziling spoke resolutely, “Since she has come to our door, she will not be able to escape. We have no choice but to deal with her to the end, I want to see, other than pretending to be in a coma, what magic trick she could play.”

Kou Zhong asked in surprised, “You seemed to be convinced that she is a female demon. If later on we can confirm that she is a pitiful woman who had her acupoints sealed by Qu Ao using some bizarre technique, won’t it be a big joke?”

Revealing a confident smile, Xu Ziling replied in a laid-back manner, “This battle is about patience and confidence; as long as we can drive her to show her true character, we win. Do you understand?”

Kou Zhong nodded, “Your feeling can’t be wrong,” he said, “We’ll simply go along with her to the end! I don’t believe she can pretend to be asleep forever. Ay! I would rather face Qu Ao than falling into this thorny problem.”

By dusk that day, they have already covered a distance of approximately ten li, while studying the surrounding for a good place to set their camp that night.

At this time they were only about six or seven li from Baizhang Gorge, but in order to avoid the battlefield the previous night, they had to make a detour, and thus had to travel seven, eight li extra distance. Besides, they would not be able to reach Baizhang Gorge tonight anyway, plus it was really not a good idea to journey through the Gorge at night.

The route they were taking was all out-of-the-way mountain and fields,

desolate terrain, where weeds grew and spread, without any sign of human habitation.

Finally they decided to stop for the night at a flat, open space.

After taking the woman in yellow into the tent, Duan Yucheng and Bao Zhifu walked out in silence as if they were in daze.

Shi Jie and Ma Gui found an excuse to look at her. As a result the four guys looked as if they were bewitched. Seeing this, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were inwardly very anxious.

Although the two boys have repeatedly warned those four guys, but not only they did not believe, they practically did not even listen to them.

Pulling Xu Ziling aside, Kou Zhong said, "And now we are really stuck between a rock and a hard place. If this woman is indeed a treasure that worth those two sides fighting over, then at least one side will prepare an ambush at Baizhang Gorge. In which case we can declare the end of our salt trading endeavor, and Yucheng and the others, those four guys' life will be difficult to protect."

After a short pause, he continued, "If we go Baizhang Gorge tonight to scout, if someone's coming to steal her, not only we'll lose her, Yucheng and the others will also lose their lives in vain. What should we do?"

"Moving is not as good as staying still," Xu Ziling replied, "We are staying here to guard tonight, tomorrow we'll go to the front of the Gorge and make plans there. Ay! Other than Baizhang Gorge, is there any other route we can take?"

"Of course there is," Kou Zhong replied, "But it will take ten days longer. Perhaps by that time the 'Jade Annulus of He Clan' will already be snatched by someone else."

Xu Ziling was upset, "You already have 'Duke Yang Treasure', yet you still dwell on 'Jade Annulus of He Clan'; since when did you become so greedy?" he asked.

Kou Zhong laughed apologetically and said, “Ling Shao, please calm down. I was just making a real-life analogy! Can’t I even joke with you?”

Before Xu Ziling could answer, a faint sound of hoof beats was coming from a distance, gradually getting louder. Could it be that ‘speaking of Cao Cao[1], Cao Cao thus appears’? If Qu Ao personally came, how should they deal with him?

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stood side-by-side, calmly waiting for the enemy’s arrival. Duan Yucheng, four guys immediately got busy buckling up their mules, as well as taking the woman in yellow out of the tent and into the mule cart especially fitted to transport her.

Under the light of the crescent-moon above, they saw thirteen riders galloping toward them along the route they took earlier; apparently they were following the tracks left by the mule carts.

Obviously the newcomers had seen them, because they slowed down their horses.

The leader was a big and tall middle-aged man, clad in black warrior attire, with a red cloak on the outside, and a thick black moustache above his lips.

One of his features that left the deepest impression on the two boys was his face; the skin was full of holes and protrusions like rough lemon skin, but the pair of eyes embedded on that pockmarked face was shiny like a pair of small lanterns, making his entire person gives off some kind of both terrifying and powerful charisma like a wild beast.

All the men behind him were also dressed in black; all came in various shapes and sizes: tall, short, lean and stout, but none did not reveal some kind or heroic air.

Kou Zhong whispered in Xu Ziling’s ear, “I am afraid the Village Master of Duba Village is here.”

Xu Ziling nodded, “Speaking about which, last night he and us were comrade-

in-arms, so if we can avoid fighting, let's not fight."

Meanwhile the Duba Village men reined their horses to stop about ten zhang away from the two boys, and then they flew down together; their movement was orderly, fast and nimble.

The leader stepped out of the formation, walked over toward the two boys, and then cupping his fist, he said, "Zaixia Duba Village's Zhuangzhu [Village Master] Fang Zetao; I wonder if the two gentlemen are Kou Xiongdi and Xu Xiongdi, whose name shook the land under the heavens recently."

Seeing his polite manner, good impression grew in the two boys' heart.

Kou Zhong returned the propriety and replied, "Fang Zhuangzhu praised us too much; the two of us are merely fugitives driven to the east and chased to the west by other people."

Fang Zetao laughed aloud and said, "Success without arrogance is the sign of true heroes. How could we call those who were able to kill Ren Shaoming in the midst of magnificent army with thousands of men and horses, and were still able to get away easily, as mere fugitives?"

Xu Ziling smiled and said, "Fang Zhuangzhu needs not praise us. You are gracing us with your presence this time, is it for the sake of that lady in yellow whom we rescued last night?"

Fang Zetao's eyes shone with a warm and concerned look; modestly and politely he asked, "Gentlemen's kindness in rendering assistance to us last night, I, Fang Zetao, will never forget. May I ask where Miss Wanwan is now?"

Breathing a sigh of relief, Kou Zhong said, "So she is called Wanwan. May I ask what is her relationship to Fang Zhuangzhu?"

Fang Zetao looked back to his men and said, "Spread out and be on the lookout, be sure to be on your guard."

After his men acknowledged his order and spread out to all directions, Fang Zetao said amiably, "May we talk while walking?"

The two boys felt a little ridiculous for their previous paranoia. Nodding their heads, they led him toward the mule cart where Wanwan was.

Fang Zetao said, "Wanwan's lot in life was extremely pitiful. When Ol' Fang met her, her family's carriage and horses were robbed by thieves, not one of her family members was spared. Those lowly thieves had voracious desire for her loveliness, and were about to carry out their beastly desire when I encountered them by chance. So I killed the bunch of them and rescued her back to the Village."

Kou Zhong said, "Please forgive this kid for being short-sighted, but seeing your respected Village's troop arrangement last night, I know that you are definitely not nameless entity of Jianghu world, yet why have we never heard about your Village's distinguished name?"

"Perhaps it is because the days of our Village's existence is still short," Fang Zetao answered, "I was originally a Sui general. After the muddleheaded ruler was assassinated by Yuwen Huaji, I went to set my foot at Jingling, but I did not have any thought of proclaiming myself king like other people; therefore, together with many brothers who have accompanied me for many years we established Duba Village. On one hand it is to guard against robbers, on the other hand we want to wait for a wise master to appear, so that we can pledge our allegiance to him, and hence avoid Jingling from disaster and misfortune."

The two boys nodded for this sudden enlightenment.

"However," Xu Ziling said, "These two characters 'Duba' seem to be extremely overbearing. Zhuangzhu's not afraid others might have misunderstanding?"

Fang Zetao laughed and said, "Without a domineering name, how could we suppress the thieves from everywhere? Presently marauders are forming alliances and building their powers, there are hundreds of such groups. They loot all over the place and enlist ruffians and runaway criminals. Included among these, Xiang, Fang, Mao and Cao, four major bandits are the most vicious as well

as the most famous. Oh! Wanwan!”

By this time the three of them had reached the mule cart. As soon as Fang Zetao saw the peerless beauty Wanwan, who was lying on makeshift bed of straw, he disregarded everything and rushed desperately toward the cart; overwhelmed with emotion, his voice trembled, “How is she doing?”

This moment the two boys no longer had even half a shred of suspicion. Kou Zhong explained her condition. Seriously and with utmost care Fang Zetao reached out and pressed his fingers on her wrist. Soon afterwards bean-sized beads of sweats appeared on his forehead. Disappointed, he said, “What kind of acupoint sealing technique is this? Her meridian is empty and fluttering; it is not blocked, but it can’t converge the qi and breathing either, as if she is weak from an incurable illness.”

Judging from what he said, the two boys were able to infer that Fang Zetao was an expert in internal, qigong skill, a first-class martial art master of the Wulin. No wonder he was able to proclaim himself hegemon in Jingling.

Xu Ziling had quite good impression on him, he said, “Is Fang Zhuangzhu familiar with Qu Ao’s acupoint sealing technique? Such a strange technique, which we have never seen before, must be Qu Ao personally put his hand to it?”

Until now, they were still unclear on how the battle started the previous night.

Fang Zetao shook his head and said, “Definitely not Qu Ao personally, because he has never set his foot on the Central Plains. The ones who came were his three disciples, Chang Shumou, Hua Lingzi and Genggehu’er. Most probably it was Chang Shumou’s handiwork. This man reportedly has acquired eighty percent of Qu Ao’s skill. Qu Ao’s three major consummate skills with which his name shook the outer regions, only he is able to link up all three together.”

After committing the name ‘Chang Shumou’ into his memory, Kou Zhong’s tiger-eyes shone coldly as he said, “How did Miss Wanwan get tied on that post?”

Fang Zetao’s eyes softened as he looked at Wanwan tenderly, and then

sighing, he said, "It could be said a sudden and unexpected disaster. Half a month ago, I suddenly received Ren Shaoming's letter, requesting me to realign my allegiance to Tieqi Hui. Naturally I categorically declined his request, and right away strengthened the city defense, afraid that they would come to attack. These past two years not a single day passed without we are making adequate preparation. With the support of the citizens, we dare to boast that even Ren Shaoming going on an all-out attack, we can easily defend ourselves for about a year."

Kou Zhong nodded and said, "Naturally Ren Shaoming would not dare to provoke Du Fuwei and Fu Gongyou. If he managed to seize Jingling, he could establish a northerly-accessible military base north of the Yangtze River; that's why he was very interested in Jingling."

Fang Zetao was astounded, "I did not expect Kou Xiong to be so knowledgeable in this area," he said.

Xu Ziling was puzzled, "Ren Shaoming is dead, Tieqi Hui is all split up and in pieces, Chang Shumou's men became lone army, why did they still come to provoke you?"

Fang Zetao replied distressingly, "On this, even I cannot figure it out either. Three days ago, somebody suddenly broke into our Village. This person's skill was very high, not only he wounded more than a dozen of my men, he even kidnapped Wanwan. Ay! To be honest with you, nowadays Wanwan has become my, this Ol' Fang's lifeblood. It's not that I have never seen beautiful women, but since the first time I saw her, I have fallen deeply in love with her. I just feel that if I lose her, everything else will lose its meaning. This scheme of Chang Shumou really pinched my crucial point, so that I was losing my mind."

Duan Yucheng, Bao Zhifu, Shi Jie and Ma Gui, who were standing around listening, all nodded their head in empathy.

It would be strange indeed if anybody who saw such a beautiful woman did not fall head over heels in love with her.

Fang Zetao continued, "Three days ago I received a letter from Chang Shumou,

telling me that Wanwan has fallen into their hands, and told me to decide life and death outside Baizhang Gorge, as well as to decide Wanwan's fate. Ay! It was the most difficult decision I have to make in my whole life. I knew very well that the opponent was using the 'moving the tiger from the mountain' stratagem, but inside Jingling there are thousands and tens of thousands people relying on my protection. Between that and Wanwan, how am I supposed to choose?"

Kou Zhong and co showed an understanding and sympathizing look.

Fang Zetao sighed and said, "Finally I decided to hold back my troops without moving, I stayed in Jingling. Between public and private matters, I still know what to do and what not to do."

Kou Zhong and the others looked at each other in bewilderment; if that was the case, how come there was war last night?

Fang Zetao smiled wryly and said, "I am not surprised gentlemen are at a loss, simply because my valiant general, who was also my younger brother Fang Zeliu, against my expectation went out with his troops privately to rescue Wanwan. It was only then did I know that he was also in love with Wanwan. Last night it was unfortunate that he died in battle. When the survivors came back to report to me that two gentlemen had rescued Wanwan, I was unable to hold back anymore. Leaving the city, I went to look for gentlemen, until finally I met with you here."

Xu Ziling sighed inwardly that she was indeed a femme fatale. "I wonder if Fang Zhuangzhu has taken Miss Wanwan as your wife?" he asked.

Fang Zetao shook his head dejectedly, "That is something that I wanted very much to ask her every time I saw her, but each time I did not dare to open my mouth, afraid that she would flatly refuse, or worse, she would simply brush her sleeve and leave," he said, "She does not like to talk, she likes to be alone, her character is very difficult to fathom, but obviously my adoration of her is growing with each passing day."

Everyone was silent.

Looking at this exceptional beauty, which looked like she was sleeping soundly, an image of beauty speaking softly and smiling tenderly appeared in everybody's imagination.

Right this moment, a strong force was pressing down from above. The cart covering burst open.

[1] Cao Cao (155-220), famous statesman and general at the end of Han, noted poet and calligrapher, later warlord, founder and first king of Cao Wei, father of Emperor Cao Pi; the main villain of novel the Romance of Three Kingdoms.

Book 8 Chapter 12 – A Thousand Li To Save A Beauty

Duan Yucheng, four men, had rather shallow power, they were the first to be jolted and staggered back, away from the mule cart.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were also aghast, knowing that the incoming person's martial art skill was at least at Ba Fenghan's level that he was able to elude Fang Zetao's men who were guarding all around outside, and only after he dropped from the sky did they realize his presence and thus completely lost the key moment.

Kou Zhong traversed one step sideways, the Moon in the Well left his back and went up to chop the air above him.

Xu Ziling lowered his waist in a horse stance, with both palms raised up.

Feng Zetao was an outstanding martial artist as well, pulling out his sword, he drew six, seven sword patterns in the air, to protect the area above Wanwan.

‘Dang! Bang!’

Kou Zhong's Moon in the Well's yellow glow grew strong, it hit the enemy's weapon squarely. But he immediately groaned inwardly.

Turned out the weapons the opponent was wielding was a pair of flickering-with-golden-rays strange shields, each shield was about two chi long, wide on the top and pointy on the bottom, the edges were sharp like saber blade. This

kind of never-seen-before strange-shaped weaponry not only could attack and defend, it also seemed to be impenetrable of the enemy's weapon.

As soon as the saber and the shield collided, a strong, peerlessly violent reaction force immediately shook the Moon in the Well that it bounced back.

Before Kou Zhong had any opportunity to send out the second strike, like a clump of floating cloud the shield's sharp edge already pared down in an oblique angle. Even though Kou Zhong was dauntless, he was caught off guard and had no choice but to move away.

Xu Ziling's double palms struck up and hit the center of the left shield. He felt the surface of the shield was covered with sharp spines. Although the spines failed to pierce his true-qi-infused muscle of his palms, he did not dare to go all-out; withdrawing his strength, the opponent's strength immediately overpowered him and sent him rolling on the ground in such a sorry state.

Fang Zetao wanted to take advantage while the enemy was dealing with Kou and Xu, two people, by thrusting his sword in the gap between the two shields to injure the enemy, who would have thought that in the blink of an eye Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were forced to retreat, and the pair of shield closed up?

'Bing!'

The sword was rigidly locked down by the pair of shields, which then continued to press down on his head. Having no way out, Fang Zetao dropped down to the bottom of the cart.

A man, wearing snow-white outfit, handsome and slender, looked about thirty, descended on the mule cart like an immortal descended from the heaven, with a lofty quality as if he looked at the world disdainfully out of the corner of his eyes.

His eyes emitted faint blue glint, a hint of gentle and soft smile seemed to be eternally carved on the corners of his mouth. His straight nose and strong jaws, his sharp contrast physique, his broad shoulders, made others felt like he was a lofty mountain that would not be easily knocked down by the enemy.

With a slight smile on his face, he fixed his gaze on Wanwan. Putting the shields back behind his back, he praised, “This stunning beauty is certainly the best in the world.”

This moment Fang Zetao came out from the bottom of the cart on the other side; he was accompanied by twelve of his men, who rushed over in a flurry. On top of that, with Kou Zhong and his company, their strength suddenly increased several folds. However, because they ‘refrained from shooting at the rat for fear of breaking the vase’, afraid that he might harm Wanwan, nobody dared to rush onto the mule cart to attack.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were baffled; the former came closer to the rear of the mule cart and said with a giggle, “Are you that guy, Chang Shumou? Your pair of golden shields is quite interesting.”

On the other hand, Xu Ziling inched closer to the front of the mule cart and calmly stood there. There was not the slightest hint of anxiety or upset because of the setback they suffered on his face. Instead, it was Fang Zetao who lost his cool.

“Chang Shumou,” he said sternly, “If you dare to harm her, don’t even think of leaving this place alive.”

Chang Shumou’s blue eyes cast a disdainful look at Fang Zetao, but he turned toward Kou Zhong and said, “Do you know who Ren Shaoming is?”

Kou Zhong replied nonchalantly, “I heard he was your Shifu’s illegitimate child; is that right?”

Murderous aura flashed briefly in Chang Shumou’s eyes. Throwing his head back and roaring in laughter, he said, “You really have guts. But one day you will regret what you have just said.”

And then, turning to Xu Ziling, he smiled and said, “Your punching and kicking skill is quite exceptional; that LuoCha woman would definitely not have such disciple, was it from the ‘Secret to Long Life’?”

Calm and unruffled in the midst of chaos, Xu Ziling replied, "What I learned is just cheap tricks I pieced together from the east and gathered together from the west, how could it worth comparing to Changshu Xiong who received instruction from brilliant master?"

The two boys' indifference toward him has incited a profound-mystery feeling in Chang Shumou's heart. Suddenly he had an idea, "How about I kill this woman first, and then we all fight with everything we have?" he said sharply.

His countenance changed, Fang Zetao shouted, "How dare you!"

But Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "Good idea!" Jumping up suddenly, he brandished his saber and hacked down on Chang Shumou.

At the same time the mules neighed in a start and jumped forward. Turned out Xu Ziling shot two streams of finger wind in secret, shooting at the butt of the two mules in front of the cart.

Fang Zetao and the others turned pale with fright. They knew that as soon as Chang Shumou kicked with his toes, Wanwan would definitely perish, saints and deities would not be able to save her life back.

Xu Ziling made a somersault and landed on the driver seat of the mule cart, and immediately sent out a punch toward Chang Shumou across empty air.

Chang Shumou laughed aloud, like a pair of wings, his golden shields rose up to the left and right, subsequently blocking one saber and one punch. At the same time his toes kicked forward to provoke the beauty lying down at his feet. But suddenly his ankle tightened. Unexpectedly a whip wrapped itself several times around his ankle, and it was only then did he realize he had fallen into a trap.

A huge force tugged him that he nearly fell facedown. Busily he applied his power to weigh himself down, but his left foot was already shifted four cun before he steadied himself and stood still.

The mules were running faster and faster. Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong attacked

simultaneously from front and back. Even with his conceit, Chang Shumou did not dare to deal with the two boys' violent attack head-on, especially not with his left foot under the enemy's control. Taking a sharp intake of qi, he leaped halfway into the air, his left foot spun several small circles to free himself from the entanglement of the whip.

By this time the mule cart already rushed out five more zhang ahead.

Fang Zetao, who was running after them from behind, soared into the air, his sword swept in a long arch to take a stab at Chang Shumou's back.

Still three zhang high in the air, without even looking Chang Shumou swept the golden shield on his right hand backhandedly, parrying Fang Zetao's attack that both the sword and the person were thrown to the other side, while at the same time he seized this opportunity to send out two streams of powerful qi with his shields, forcing Duan Yucheng and the others to roll sideways to evade.

Meanwhile Chang Shumou borrowed the reaction force and raised his qi to propel himself like a shooting star to catch up with the racing mule cart from above, and launched an attack toward Kou Zhong, who was standing on guard on the tail end of the cart.

Xu Ziling called out loudly, "Fang Zhuangzhu, no need to run after us, we will meet again at Jingling!"

Being frightened, the mules ran wildly forward as fast as they could; by the time Xu Ziling finished shouting, they already covered more than a dozen zhang of distance.

By this time Fang Zetao has just sprang up from the ground, he watched helplessly as the mule cart rushed onto a small hill, and vanished down the slope on the other side of the knoll.

The yellow glow from Kou Zhong's Moon in the Well flashed suddenly, strike after strike the saber kept hacking down, each time the saber struck Chang Shumou's golden shield, it forced him to fall back about a zhang, so that he had to exert his strength to keep up.

Xu Ziling was in charge of driving the mule cart, and he quite enjoyed it.

Chang Shumou's heart sank, he was also furious that smoke was spouting through his seven orifices. Yet because Kou Zhong was waiting leisurely for the enemy to exhaust his strength, and he was tightly defending the rear end of the cart, plus his saber technique was swift and fierce beyond compare, even if Chang Shumou had ability that encompassed everything under heaven, all along he was unable to catch up with the mule cart, and thus was unable to unleash his specialty of neutralizing the saber with his pair of shields.

Watching Chang Shumou chasing them from behind like a mad dog, Kou Zhong laughed involuntarily, "Kid, run faster! That's right! Like that!" he hooted.

Suddenly his saber swept down.

'Dang!'

Chang Shumou was forced back again.

From the front, Xu Ziling jovially shouted, "Is there any way you can chop and split his shield up? And then we can turn around to give him bad luck."

Kou Zhong had a brainwave; lowering his voice, he said, "Under the cart! Understand?" And then throwing his head back, he roared in laughter, "What's so difficult about that?"

Suddenly he let out a roar; as if a scorching thunder emerged from the flat earth, his pair of sharp eyes, as bright as the cold star, exploded with unprecedented dense and biting coldness, his power spiked up abruptly, forceful and ferocious without equal. Kou Zhong's entire body leaped out of the cart, the Moon in the Well turned into a streak of glittering yellow ray shooting toward Chang Shumou, who, by this time, had managed to get as close as half a zhang away from the cart.

Chang Shumou had never expected Kou Zhong to be this dauntless; even

more, he had never anticipated that Kou Zhong would leave the cart to pounce on him. However, although he knew that Kou Zhong's saber strike would not be easy to block, in full confidence of his superior martial art skill, he was not afraid at all.

His left shield went up to block, his right shield swept across Kou Zhong's legs. But suddenly he had a feeling that something was not right; instantly his soul flew away and scattered.

What happened was that Xu Ziling unexpectedly dropped himself from the front of the cart to the ground, and let the cart passed above him, so that in a moment he was exactly below Kou Zhong. And then from the ground, he propelled himself up.

Chang Shumou was also an outstanding character, in this critical moment he was not flustered. Changing the direction of the right shield, he cut down instead.

Xu Ziling met the right shield with both palms; a loud clashing sound like a muffled thunder ensued as the two streams of qi power collided.

At the same time, Kou Zhong's full-powered saber strike violently crashed onto his left shield.

One cold, one hot, two streams of frightening qi power burst into Chang Shumou's body together.

'Dang!

The golden shield shattered in pieces.

Like a kite with cut string Chang Shumou flew backward, with fresh blood sprayed out of his mouth.

Flying ten more zhang back, as soon as he touched the ground, he ran into the sparse forest on the left.

By the time Kou Zhong landed on the ground, Xu Ziling has already sprung up from the ground. As they exchanged victory smile, they suddenly realized that the cart carrying the beauty was still pulled along by the mules that were running away like mad. Hence the two boys ran after it in a great rush.

Book 9 Chapter 1 –Amorous Demon Of Yin Gui

Passing through the woods and crossing the creek, the mule cart continued on to the wilderness, going faster and faster. But the more they were chasing it, the more Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt alarmed.

This was impossible.

Even if the cart was pulled by highest quality colts, with first class driver driving it, because the path was not really a flat street, it had holes and bumps and would be difficult to pass, the two boys ought to be able to overtake it for quite some time.

Yet it was as if the mules knew the way as they swerved left and swayed right through the woods, over the hills, thru the gaps between rocks, running as fast as speeding horse, totally beyond their natural ability.

The two boys knew something was amiss. They took a chance to leap up the top of a tree, but as they looked down, their entire body suddenly turned cold.

They saw a woman with long silvery hair, wearing golden colored oversized robe, was sitting on the driver seat of the mule cart. Her upper body leaned forward in some kind of weird and unnatural posture, both hands reached out with her palms on the mules' buttock. Blood was seeping out of the two mules' eyes, ears, mouth and nose as they desperately ran for their lives.

The peerless beauty Wanwan was still lying peacefully on the cart, so serene

that she did not seem to be affected by everything that was going on outside.

This kind of tyrannical skill where one was able to spur and enhance an animal's potential, not only the two boys had never heard of, they had never even thought that such skill existed.

But obviously the mules would not be able to hold for long; this extremely cruel thing has almost come to its end.

The two boys exchanged eye signals. A righteous indignation flared out in their heart for the opponent's disgraceful act.

At this moment the pair of mules racing wildly was running through a wooded area and snapped and broke more than a dozen small trees blocking their way. As they ran up the slope of a small hill, naturally their speed decreased considerably.

Seeing that they could not afford to lose any more time, Xu Ziling called out, "I'll help you!" while deliberately fell back a bit.

Kou Zhong has been working with him for so long that he intuitively understood what he had in mind. Immediately he raised his qi to leap up.

Very lightly, as if he did not use any strength at all, Xu Ziling pressed his palms onto Kou Zhong's back.

Kou Zhong's body immediately soared into the air, his speed was several times higher than his regular speed. Like a rainbow he swept the air in an arc toward the mule cart.

When he was about to reach the mule cart, as if she had eyes on the back of her head, the silver-haired woman suddenly waved her left golden sleeve back; more than ten black dots shot toward Kou Zhong.

Kou Zhong remained calm. The Moon in the Well left his back and swept a large circle in front of his body. Twelve cow's hair needles met the saber and fell

down.

But Kou Zhong was also adversely affected; he slowed down, and the mule cart dashed over the top of the slope and rushed down the other side.

Xu Ziling sped up to catch up and give Kou Zhong another push.

Seizing this opportunity, Kou Zhong and his saber fused together and soared high into the air. He started later but arrived sooner. Flying over the top of the hill, he reached just above the silver-haired woman, and hacked his saber down.

The silver-haired woman suddenly shook her square head [orig. small cicada with square head], her silver hair shot up like a whip, lashing toward Kou Zhong's Moon in the Well. The timing and the angle of attack were impeccable.

Naturally Kou Zhong did not expect such weird move.

The hair and the saber collided; both combatants were severely shaken.

Kou Zhong was jolted by her seemingly continuous soft internal energy that he was thrown backward. The silver-haired woman was jerked by his strong qi that her tender body lurched forward.

The two mules neighed miserably and fell down, dead.

Receiving continuous blow, both the cart and the mules' dead body continued rushing down the slope at great speed. The situation was extremely dire.

Kou Zhong knew that after his powerful qi entered her body, it was transmitted into the poor mules' body. Inwardly he was very regretful, but the die has already been cast, nothing he could do about it.

Seeing the cart was about to stumble over the mules' carcass and flipped to its side, he hastily raised his qi to make a somersault. His left hand reached the whip around his waist and sent it out toward the cart to catch Wanwan.

Who would have thought that since the cart was about to overturn and was lurching forward, plus the cart's own momentum was rather strong, the tip of the whip missed Wanwan by a hairsbreadth. He failed within the sight of success.

Meanwhile one side of the cart's wheels had already off the ground, the cart was about to topple to the other side.

Like a clump of golden cloud the silver-haired woman soared into the air, spinning her body around, she waved her sleeve. Immediately Wanwan was rolled up inside her golden sleeve, her graceful hair came loose, its beauty surpassed the immortals, lightly floating like fallen leaves.

As Kou Zhong met the silver-haired woman face-to-face, immediately a chill crept into his heart.

The woman's profile was quite beautiful, but her face was deathly pale without the slightest bit of human's color. Her eyes flickered with bizarre, gloomy and fierce sharp gleam, just like an amorous ghost from the netherworld looking to devour human's life.

The mule cart overturned; it continued rolling down the hill, dragging the mules' dead body along the dirt path, creating a chaotic collision noise.

Holding Wanwan in her arms, the silver-haired woman made a somersault and landed on the green grass at the bottom of the hill.

Not far from there was a small river, the opposite bank was emerald green forest. Under the moonlight it looked even more serene, peaceful and beautiful.

One after another Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling caught up with her, ready to confront her.

With wooden face the silver-haired woman said, "Indeed you carry some weight, no wonder even Ren Shaoming lost his life under your hands." Her voice

hoarse and deep and low, making those who hear it feel very uncomfortable.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “Yin Gui Pai female demon [see footnote on chapter title, Book 8 Chapter 10], report your name to me.”

Without any change in her countenance, the silver-haired woman said, “When did I tell you that I am from Yin Gui Pai?”

Shaking the Moon in the Well in his hand, Kou Zhong thundered, “Your internal energy is of the same character of Amorous Nun’s; you still want to deceive us?”

The silver-haired woman’s countenance still did not change the slightest bit, she said coldly, “Just consider you have a bit of eyesight. I am one of the four demons under Jiaozhu [Cult Leader], Yin Fa Mo Nu [Silver-haired Demoness] Dan Mei. I am going to take this natural born beauty back with me and report to my superior since she is most suitable to enter our Sect. If the two of you understood my intention, get lost immediately, the farther the better. Otherwise I might teach you a lesson that it would be too late for you to regret.”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, “I don’t believe you have the ability to teach us a lesson that it would be too late for us to regret. Why not let the woman down, and let me see if you really have some skills I can learn?”

Dan Mei’s eyes flashed sharply. “Get lost!” she hissed in low voice, “Or I’ll kill her first.”

Xu Ziling, who all along was watching with folded arms, suddenly sneered and said, “Really funny! You have just said you are going to recruit Wanwan on your honorable Jiaozhu’s behalf, and now you said you are going to kill Wanwan; it can clearly be seen that you are just spouting nonsense. Less bullshitting. Zhong Shao, show your formidability and let her increase her knowledge.”

“All right!” Kou Zhong thundered.

As soon as his roar subsided, Kou Zhong straightened up his backbone, his

bearing suddenly became bold and powerful without rival; raising his saber, he strode forward.

His pair of tiger-eyes was bright and clear like the cold star, emitting a deep, incomparably chilly sharp gleam, his imposing manner solid, full of power. The strangest thing was that he did not seem to be afraid at all that Dan Mei would use Wanwan as a shield.

Even Xu Ziling standing on the side also felt that the Moon in the Well carried dense, austere saber qi, so what Dan Mei, who was standing right in front of him, felt need not be mentioned.

For the first time Dan Mei's pale countenance showed a stunned look. "You really don't care about this woman's life?" she shouted sternly.

"That's exactly right!" Kou Zhong thundered.

The Moon in the Well attacked swiftly, it turned into a rainbow, the target was unexpectedly Wanwan, which was carried horizontally in Dan Mei's arms.

Xu Ziling acted as if he has had foreknowledge of what was happening; standing in relaxed position with folded arms, he looked like someone who was enjoying a good show.

Finally Dan Mei's countenance changed slightly; she quickly floated backward.

But Kou Zhong was unwilling to let her off, like a shadow he followed her closely, like a meteor catching up with the moon he chased after her. The Moon in the Well chopped down from top to bottom, his movements were faster than lightning flashes, while at the same time the wind generated by his saber was as strong as the mountain, swift and fierce without equal.

Dan Mei was so furious that her eyes shot ominous glint; she soared high, like a turning wheel the pair of delicate feet under her golden-colored embroidered skirt launched chain-kicks to block Kou Zhong's saber momentum, which was storming up toward her like violent waves.

The sound of clashing qi lingered on faintly.

Seeing her kicking skill was this formidable, Kou Zhong's fighting spirit was aroused. With a somersault he leaped above Dan Mei's head, the Moon in the Well turned into cold rays filling the air, coming down like a net above her head.

The most formidable aspect of this move was that it would be difficult for Dan Mei to use her legs to block the saber.

Dan Mei snorted coldly; unexpectedly she tossed the peerless beauty Wanwan in her hands upwards to meet Kou Zhong's blade, while at the same time she dropped rapidly to the ground and spun sideways to evade.

Although Kou Zhong's saber strike seemed so ruthless, he actually left a lot of leeway; seeing his scheme prevailed, he promptly held the saber back, while his left palm brushed on Wanwan's body and then he leaped back to get out of the way.

Xu Ziling finally made his move.

Faster than a spark from a flint he flashed toward Dan Mei and launched an attack with all his might, without giving any leeway at all.

In an instant the two of them already exchanged more than a dozen punches and kicks.

Not only Dan Mei lost her acute spirit, when dealing with Kou Zhong's hacks earlier, her blood and qi were churning, so that this moment she was unable to cope with the two boys' tag-team tactics. As soon as she revealed a gap in her defense, Xu Ziling sent out a palm strike toward her left shoulder. Instantly her mouth spurted blood, she staggered and stumbled down sideways.

But she was also an outstanding character. With a loud roar she ran away toward the wilderness, crossing the brook, and disappeared into the depth of the forest on the opposite bank.

As if she was being carried by invisible hands, Wanwan dropped slowly on the soft grass, unscathed.

Kou Zhong came over to Xu Ziling's side. They both gazed on this otherworldly fairy-like peerless beauty.

Reaching out and putting his hand on Xu Ziling's shoulder, Kou Zhong whispered, "What's our chance of success?"

For an outsider, Kou Zhong seemed to blabber incoherently. But naturally Xu Ziling did not have that problem. "At least 80%," he replied indifferently, "Whether it was Chang Shumou or Dan Mei, both wanted to lure us away, so that this most formidable direct disciple since the beginning of the history of Yin Gui Pai can carry out some kind of plot against us. And it may be assumed that this plot must involve some physical contact."

His countenance changed, Kou Zhong rubbed his hands and said, "My hands seem to be okay!"

Knowing that Kou Zhong was simply 'dressing up as God, playing the devil', Xu Ziling was unable to help laughing, "Go to your Niang!" he said, "If just by touching she can inflict damage, even Ning Daoqi, Bi Xuan and Fu Cailin, add to that the Zhaizhu [monastery master] of Ci Hang Jing Zhai, are no match for her. Ay! Too bad there's still 20% uncertainty; otherwise, Zhong Shao, right now you could get your saber and see if you could chop her alive."

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "I definitely won't have a heart to do that. If she really is a Big Sister of Yin Gui, you can't but admire her. Just look at how touching she is. Looking down or looking across, she does not look like a goblin that kills or harms people. Yet the fact is that any man who came across her would, to some extent, suffer some pain because of her."

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "And the two of us are remarkably alike one of her victims."

Leaning close to him, Kou Zhong spoke in the tiniest voice possible, "How

about sending her back to Fang Zetao and tell him to take care and bid him farewell? That way, won't we escape from the abyss of suffering?"

Like waterfall Wanwan's beautiful hair cascaded down in all directions, lining her jade face vermillion lips, which, under the illumination of the moon, looked beautiful and alluring beyond human comprehension, that even a senior monk who has had painstaking cultivation for many years would be moved by her that he would be reluctant to leave this world.

Xu Ziling sneered and said, "Funny that you and he are still calling each other Xiong and Di [older and younger brother, respectively]. Supposing she is genuine goods at fair prices Yin Gui siren, it would be strange indeed if Fang Zetao would not suffer his city broken and the people perish. If a moment ago we did not lure Chang Shumou away, perhaps Fang Zetao would have been killed by him."

Kou Zhong blew out a mouthful of cold air and said, "Are you saying that we ought to bring this hot potato along on our journey, and ascertain first whether she is a dragon or a snake before making decision whether we should hand her over to the infatuated Fang Zhuangzhu?"

Xu Ziling's eyes were gleaming with cold flashes as he stared hard at the beautiful Wanwan, who was lying on the ground, who, in her tight gauze clothing, revealed her incomparably graceful lines. His lips curled into a smile as he said, "This is a battle on an uncharted territory. As long as we are able to force her to show her true identity, we win the first battle."

And then he broke into laughter and said, "Come on! Let us build another bed to carry this beauty along; let's see how long can she sleep?"

From the broken down mule cart the two boys tore off an eight-chi long and three-chi wide board, and then with utmost care they placed Wanwan on the board. Without even trying to secure her on the plank, they carried her just like that, one at the front the other at the rear, and went on their way promptly.

Although the path was rugged and uneven, and from time to time they had to jump high and crouch low, yet under their ingenious cooperation, the plank stayed level throughout, which gave them quite an enjoyment that they did not

feel it was a burden at all.

Originally, after what Fang Zetao told them about Wanwan's background, their suspicion toward this sleeping beauty has been greatly reduced, but after Chang Shumou and Dan Mei appeared one after another, they suddenly felt that the opponent was trying to hide something, which made it more conspicuous. Plus for no apparent reason Xu Ziling had always had premonition, which was hard to dispel. Therefore, renewed suspicion started to grow in their hearts.

Not only Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling possessed superior ability and wisdom, they were also adept in marketplace and Jianghu's scamming and swindling tactics; coupled with imagination richer than average person's, they were able to come up with ideas that others would find it hard to achieve even in their dreams.

This moment the two boys were afraid to come across Fang Zetao and his men instead, and that was the reason why they were speeding along on the opposite direction. Only after rushing for more than ten li did they finally begin to slow down.

This moment the stars have disappeared from the night sky and the moon dimmed; it was the darkest hour just before dawn. They have come to the top of a small hill. Looking around as far as they could see, they saw there was a small village in the northwest but the grass and the trees have overgrown it. Apparently it has been abandoned by its inhabitants quite some time ago. Beyond the village was a range of hills.

Casting a glance toward the peerless beauty sleeping on the plank, Kou Zhong sighed and said, "The inhabitants of the village must have fled to Jingling to take refuge. There seemed to be a path behind the village cutting through the mountains, perhaps it's a shortcut to Jingling."

Xu Ziling looked up to the sky; he saw dark clouds gathered on the northeaster horizon. Nodding his head, he said, "Looks like heavy rain is coming this way. We do not have any problem, but I am not sure if this Miss Wanwan will have some problems. Let us seek shelter from the rain first, and then think about what we are going to do next."

Smiling wryly, Kou Zhong said, "No matter how much we think, we won't find anything. The most formidable thing about her is she is unfathomable. Just to guard against her suddenly making her move to injure others, we have to take the trouble and spend a lot of energy. Resting seemed to be a very good idea."

Once they made up their mind, the two boys lifted Wanwan up and rushed toward the small village.

Noticing that the surrounding area has been left to return to unchecked growth, Kou Zhong recalled the abandoned village where they encountered Zhai Rang and Li Mi. He said to Xu Ziling, who was carrying the plank backhandedly at the front, "Do you remember the village where Li Mi plotted against Zhai Rang? That time we plainly saw someone setting fire in the village, but when we got there, not even half a ghost was to be seen. Later on whoever that was, he never showed up. Who on earth was he?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Xu Ziling replied, "Only ghosts know! Why did you suddenly bring up the past? I nearly forget!"

Kou Zhong shook his head, "I am not sure," he replied, "Perhaps because seeing this creepy-looking village has brought back old memories? Ay! War truly inflicts a lot of suffering. Just imagine how peaceful, tranquil and leisurely this small village was, everybody lived in peace and worked happily, chicken clucking and dogs barking, but look at how dilapidated this place is now."

Xu Ziling sighed with him; momentarily nobody spoke a word. In that moment the picture in their mind was transformed into the scenery of the Garden of the Peaches of Immortality.

Soon the first streak of dawn appeared on the eastern horizon, but because the dark clouds were still covering the sky, it was even darker than before.

Suddenly a lightning flashed, followed by the rumble of a thunder, and then bean-sized raindrops started to fall, sparse at first, but soon became thick, and in the blink of an eye became a downpour. They had just passed through the decorated archway at the mouth of the village, hastily they bolted toward the closest house.

The building was dilapidated, the paint peeled off, the door opened as soon as they push it.

This house was separated into three parts, the front, the middle and the rear, with two courtyards connecting them. The house was fully furnished; although everything was simple and unadorned, it was by no means broken, it's just that everything was covered in cobweb; a totally bleak sight to behold.

After setting the plank, with the beauty Wanwan still on it, on the floor, Kou Zhong took it on himself to close the door, while Xu Ziling went to open the window a little bit, to let fresh air in and stale air out.

“Ah!”

The two boys turned around at once.

The mysterious beauty Wanwan still looked like she was in eternal slumber, but her face already had a little bit of color, making her looked even more tender and beautiful and alluring.

Seeing Xu Ziling was walking toward her, Kou Zhong jumped and pulled him back; he said in a low voice, “Don’t touch her!”

Xu Ziling knitted his brows and said, “Whatever happens, we still have to try! Whether someone sealed her acupoints, or she is playing ghost on her own, it is still a difficult problem and a challenge in the study of martial art. If we can unravel it, we will certainly be able to learn something that we previously did not know.”

Sucking in a mouthful of cold air, Kou Zhong said, “If by thousand ways, a hundred plans she did that precisely to entice us to do just that, wouldn’t that mean we fall right into her hands?”

Pulling Kou Zhong aside, Xu Ziling said in a low voice, “Just treat this as another battle! If not, how are we going to settle this matter?”

Kou Zhong finally agreed. "I have a great idea," he said, "You alone will touch her body, I will transmit my internal qi into your body, while taking the responsibility of simultaneously monitoring your and her condition. This way, if there is something wrong, we won't suffer an 'all-army being routed' situation."

"Very well!" Xu Ziling replied.

The two boys came over to her side and exchanged glances.

Xu Ziling propped her up. He felt her hands were soft, tender but supple, and could not help his heart from being swept away. Frightened, he hastily put this thought away, and calmed his mind down.

Sitting cross-legged behind her, he put one palm at the middle of her back, and used the other hand to support the back of her small head with her face looking up.

Kou Zhong also sat cross-legged behind him; his eyes looked down on his nose, his nose looking down on his heart, both palms pressed onto Xu Ziling's tiger-back.

After discharging all distracting thoughts from his heart, Xu Ziling asked softly, "Are you ready?"

"Do it now!" Kou Zhong replied heavily.

Focusing his mind and spirit, Xu Ziling slowly injected a stream of warm Yang true qi into the channel on her spine.

Right this moment, the sound of hoof beats was heard from a far, but it was getting near.

Unexpectedly, in this extremely critical moment, Wanwan's tender body started to shake.

Book 9 Chapter 2 – Fortuitous Meeting At An Abandoned Village

The two boys groaned inwardly at the same time.

What happened was that when Xu Ziling was sending his true qi into Wanwan's body, immediately he felt as if he lost control over his meridians and eight extraordinary channels.

In his great shock, Xu Ziling hastily sent out his internal energy trying to recover the true qi that was scattering like a runaway horse on an open plain, but he was still a step too late.

His true qi had turned into hundreds and thousands of streams of swirling force surging through and circling along Wanwan's eight extraordinary channels [see footnote, Book 1 Chapter 7], just like when a martial art master of internal school suffer fire deviation during true qi cultivation.

This kind of fire deviation could be catastrophic to the practitioner; minor incident would result in the loss of one's entire internal strength, major incident would result in paralysis or even sudden death.

The two boys were completely unprepared for this kind of situation, they did not know how to deal with it, and hence momentarily they panicked.

Kou Zhong cried out in low voice, "Female demon is formidable; Laozi cannot deal with her anymore!"

Xu Ziling hastily signaled him not to be reckless.

Thunder crashed, heavy rain pummeled the roof of the house, the eaves, canopies, screen windows, the courtyards and the streets, creating a variety of noises, as well as varying intensities of the sound. Cool and crisp air burst into the room and assaulted their bodies.

Mixed with this loud ensemble of the pitter patter of the rain was a cacophony of horses' hoof. A dozen or so riders were entering the village.

Xu Ziling did not have time to be bothered by anything other than Wanwan; receiving Kou Zhong's true qi, which was yin and soft in nature, he continuously blended it with his own yang and hard true qi, and said softly, "The biggest problem in true qi is that singular yang would not last. Same nature qi will repel each other, because it will surge against each other, scattering the qi of the arteries and veins all over the body. Therefore, as long as we can lead the true qi back into one, we can solve the problem."

And then, putting his mouth behind Wanwan's jade-like sparkling and translucent small ear, he said, "Isn't this precisely what you planned all along? Right now I have a 90% confidence that you are that Dajie [big sister] from Yin Gui Pai, Xiaodi really admit defeat."

Another flash of lightning streaked through the sky west of the village, painting the heaven and the earth deathly white, followed by deafening clap of thunder.

Those dozen or so riders stopped their horses, but nobody dismounted. It appeared that they were waiting for someone else.

Kou Zhong acted as if he was unaware of this bunch of people's arrival; leaning forward, he said, "Do you want to make a his-mother's bet? I bet you she is 'Yin Hou' [Empress Yin (soft/negative/feminine)] Zhu Yuyan's disciple, or perhaps she is her."

Smiling wryly, Xu Ziling asked, "What's your confidence level?"

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “Only 80%, ten per-cents less than yours. Based on the heretical nature of Yin Gui Pai people, how could they be willing to put themselves in such a dangerous situation? But if she had some other kind of heretical skill, which would make her impervious of fire deviation, this would be a different matter altogether. Ay! Just let me make my move; someone has to do it anyway.”

Xu Ziling shook his head resolutely, “We have no right to gamble with somebody else’s life,” he said, “In fact, this is a fair decisive battle, she is using her real skill to deal with us.”

Frowning, Kou Zhong said, “But if she really is a female demon from Yin Gui Pai, and we are helping her treating her injury, wouldn’t she be able to see through [orig. mountain has a connecting pulse throughout like a dragon (idiom from fengshui)] our unique qigong? What other secret can we talk about then? Supposing because of this her internal strength enjoyed tremendous progress and she defeated Shi Feixuan, we would have committed a grave offense.”

More hoof beats were heard from the other end of the village. Surprisingly it was a single rider, riding his horse slowly under the heavy rain toward the dozen or so riders that have arrived earlier.

There was a series of ringing noise as sabers and swords left their sheaths.

It was obvious that the newcomer was not a friend of the dozen or so riders.

Xu Ziling did not pay any attention of what was happening outside, he constantly gathered the true qi sent by Kou Zhong into the qi reservoir in his dantian [pubic region, about 2 inches below the navel where one’s qi resides], consciously and without exercising any restrain letting the qi automatically became a vortex of true qi, so that the qi would not be wasted.

With a faint smile full of confidence he said, “Even if she really is a female demon, despicably exploiting our chivalrous intention, we still have to deal with her righteously to the end.”

And then he called out in low voice, “Are you ready?”

Kou Zhong thought Xu Ziling was talking about regulating the meandering qi that created havoc inside Wanwan's meridians. Looking at the continuously shuddering Wanwan, without much choice he replied, "As ready as I can be!"

By the time Xu Ziling, beyond Kou Zhong's expectation, raised the vortex of qi from his dantian and flowed it upstream along his channels and burst into the hollow of Kou Zhong's right palm, somebody was shouting outside, "Passionate Prince, you are indeed gutsy and wise; knowing perfectly well that you are delivering your life yet still dare to come to keep our appointment. We, Qing Jiang Pai [Clear River (in Hubei) Sect] are full of admiration."

It was only then did Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong realize that the newcomer was the 'Passionate Prince' Hou Xibai, whose fame was rising recently, but this moment was a critical juncture where they were transmitting their internal strength and applying their power; the slightest carelessness would result in catastrophic fire deviation. Therefore, they did not dare to split their concentration to care what was going on outside.

Kou Zhong let the vortex of qi to enter the Yin Shu Channel at the center of his right palm, and then circled up toward the Yang Shu Channel on his middle finger, along the right elbow toward the Jiang Gong, over the Zhong Lou, passing through these channels and burst into his dantian. And then it flowed toward the Yang Jiao Channel on the outside of his right leg, over his toes and finally stopped at the Yong Quan acupoint in the center of his foot.

He felt his whole body was warm and cozy, and unspeakably comfortable.

This time he understood Xu Ziling's intention and strategy.

Actually, although there were thousands of schools and tens of thousands of systems in the world, each with its own unique physical characteristic, inevitably there would be the universal law of 'many superficial changes but no departure from the original stand'.

Qigong method was no exception. There will always be natural phenomenon of the strong overcomes the weak, opposite polarities attract.

In playing this game, Xu Ziling's strategy was to let the two person's yin and yang, two different true qi characteristics to combine naturally first, resulting in an automatically swirling entity. Due to the common and unusual origin of the two boys' true qi, after the integration, practically the result was self-sufficient, capable of repelling any true qi from the outside which characteristic was different from theirs, while also able to absorb any true qi similar to their own.

Therefore, as long as they were able to inject their vortex of qi into Wanwan's qi channels, they could immediately absorb back the scattering, wandering, disarrayed true qi like sea sponges absorbing water, while also link up Wanwan's meridians by relying on the same favorable method.

Supposing Wanwan was really a female demon, or perhaps Zhu Yuyan herself, due to the different internal energy cultivation method, not only it would be hard for her to restrain or gather this swirling qi, she would not have the ability to decipher the source of the qi either.

The reason Xu Ziling was sending the vortex of qi back into Kou Zhong's body first was that, on one hand, he wanted to increase the swirling power, on the other hand, more important reason was he suddenly thought that this technique would bring great benefits to both of them, to cause their qi channels to flow all around, to link up the energy channels in their entire body, to harmonize their qi.

Furthermore, yin and yang complemented each other, it could reach the Taoist school's top theory 'fire flares out of the water, flower blooms in the snow', the so-called 'Leisurely coming and going the Temple of Heaven's Moon Cave, it's spring time in all thirty six palaces' realms.

Although any ordinary martial art master of internal school would be able to steer the qi through the channels, a brilliant master would be able to process yin and yang in parallel, but never in the form of vortex of qi.

Only by learning it from the 'Secret to Long Life', and by training it separately, would the two boys be able to produce such phenomenon. However, were it not for the special case because they wanted to help this woman treating her injury, where the true qi was rapidly draining away, the two boys would not have this kind of opportunity.

According to physical law, vortices carry stronger and more condense forces compared to straight flow.

After understanding Xu Ziling's intention, Kou Zhong immediately grasped this one in a thousand golden opportunity. Letting the vortex of qi circled around his body, he absorbed the true qi filling up his channels while continuously strengthening it.

Outside, the hoofbeats grew quiet; apparently Hou Xibai reined his horse to stop.

Thunderstorm continued, the flashing of lightning and the rumbling of thunder intermingled with the sound of horses neighing.

Every time the lightning lit up the murky dark house, Wanwan's cloud-like beautiful hair seemed to shine; it was mysterious and surreal.

When the vortex of qi was flowing from the Yin Qiao channel inside the right leg back to Jiang Gong, and then down the Yong Quan acupoint in the middle of the left foot, a clear and melodious male voice outside spoke indifferently, "Cut the crap! Where is Chen Buyun?"

A man's voice replied, "Your Shaoye is here. Hou Xibai, you killed two of my sworn brothers, today a debt of blood must be paid in blood."

Hou Xibai threw his head back and roared in laughter, which even the thunder and the rain calling each other were not able to drown it.

The laughter suddenly ceased.

Calmly, Hou Xibai said, "You want others to pay your blood debt, but others' innocent and honorable daughter, who will return it to them? Killing your two depraved thief brothers was just fulfilling the way of the heaven. And now it is your turn. Whoever dares to stop me, that person will die."

The hoof beats rumbled, indicating both sides were charging toward each other.

By this time the vortex of qi has just passed the Tian Ling acupoint at the top of the head, and down the twelve layers of Tian Chi acupoint above the jaw, down the Ren Channel, up the Du Channel, again to the left Yang Shu Channel toward the hollow of the left palm, and circled back into Xu Ziling's body.

Xu Ziling felt Kou Zhong's meridians were empty and fluttering, a condition resembling when he sent his true qi into Wanwan's system. His heart was moved; he had a faint feeling that Wanwan was really a female demon who was using this secret method, but this moment he did not have time to ponder this matter over, he could only proceed following the rule, sending the enhanced – don't know how many times - vortex of qi toward the Tian Ling acupoint first, and then sent it down to Yong Quan acupoint; precisely the opposite of the sequence Kou Zhong used in transporting the qi.

It was indeed an opportunity that was difficult to encounter throughout all ages.

First of all, finding two persons with internal qi of common origin yet dissimilar was harder than ascending the heaven. Moreover, even if two such persons could be found, for a variety of complex factors, such as the preconceived idea of cultivation method, or the problem of trust, they would never lay down everything in such a creative joint-research to develop such a strange but marvelous way of energy cultivation method.

Although previously the two boys have exploited the characteristic of these two different internal qi of common origin to enhance their own or even heal each other injuries, they had never tested this technique thoroughly, and had never converted their entire true qi into a natural vortex of qi, without leaving the least bit of true qi in their individual system, *i.e.* without harboring any unfathomable motive toward the other. Plus there was no way to speculate the origin of their cultivation method back to the 'Secret of Long Life' from the way their qi flow through the arteries and veins.

From the outside, the sound of the clashing weapons fell incessantly on their ears, the sound of miserable scream and cry of pain also unceasing.

Obviously the injured party could not be Hou Xibai, otherwise, he would have beaten the gong to recall the troops early on.

The scattering uncontrollably true qi inside Wanwan's body was growing wilder, at any time her meridians could break and her life would be gone.

Barely inaudible sound of feet touching the roof overhead was suddenly heard. The two boys jumped in fright that they nearly suffered fire deviation.

Xu Ziling struggled hard to put his shaken mind under control, because if anyone sneaked into the house at this time, taking their little lives would be as easy as turning his hand over.

The vortex of qi penetrated the hollow of the palm, it went against Wanwan's Du channel.

The two boys simultaneously broke off their breathing from the mouth and nose, and controlled their inner qi to breathe instead. With only the Ling Tai, one spot remained clear and bright, they silently controlled the flow of the vortex of qi inside Wanwan's body.

As expected, the vortex of qi flowed unimpeded, completely absorbing the wildly scattered true qi creating havoc, so that everything was back to the right track.

Outside, the sound of violent battle suddenly fell silent.

Hou Xibai's voice was heard, "Which side's expert is gracing us with your presence? Why not show up?"

A tender laughter came from the roof tile right above the three people's head, followed by silver-bell-like alluring female voice, "Hou Xibai is indeed not an ordinary man. The crooked Qingjiang Pai, who consider themselves to be big

Sect in Jiangnan, unexpectedly not a single one of them is able to withstand the power of Hou Xiong's one folding fan. It is really ridiculous."

Hou Xibai laughed and said, "Just by listening Miss' voice, I know that you are a woman with natural beauty. I was just wondering, Miss did not spare the effort to follow Zaixia's trail for a thousand li, what is your purpose?"

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong had just circulated the vortex of qi through the channels in Wanwan's entire body. This peerless beauty was also calming down. If they withdrew the vortex of qi immediately, Wanwan's condition might return to its previous state.

Fortunately the two boys were extremely daring, they were unwilling to let go just like this, thereupon they continued to transmit the vortex of qi into the most important, the life and death orifice in Wanwan's body, which was still closed firmly.

When Fu Junchuo was explaining the 'Great Method of Nine Mysteries' to them the other day, she told them about the most important secret in training it. Therefore, when they practiced the 'Secret to Long Life', involuntarily they combined the training method of the 'Great Method of Nine Mysteries' with the 'Secret to Long Life', so that the originally pure secret spiritual cultivation method has been merged together with martial art.

According to Fu Junchuo's explanation, although the channels and the acupoints are one integral entity, the usage was different. Channels are like the road between acupoint to acupoint, while the acupoint positions are like the place to lodge for the night. Every point where the channels confluence is called the gateway, which was the important building blocks that link up the channels. If the gateway is blocked, it will be like the road closure, the person will then fall sick.

Ordinary folks have regular qi channels where blood and qi flow. But true qi requires painstaking cultivation for it to develop. If the practitioner cannot get the qi to start, then his cultivation effort will be in vain.

The qi development point becomes the orifice. Therefore, as long as a martial

art master of internal school is able to examine the opposite side's channels and acupoints, he would know the depth of the opponent's maturity. Whether it was ordinary acupoint or qi orifice, it could not be concealed from the knowledgeable.

Previously, Wanwan's internal system was empty and fluttering. Forget about any qi development or closed orifice, even ordinary people's qi channels were deficient. Hence the reason they had no idea where to start, and the case became inscrutable.

From the numerous orifices, there was one which was the most important, the life and death orifice. Supposing Wanwan wanted to find a place to collect the true qi, it would have to be in this mysterious, abstruse place.

Within the human body, there are two crucial progenitor orifices, connecting the internal brain and womb, which shaped the human's real nature. If this place were injured, serious case would result in death, less severe case would result in mental capacity suffering some damage. But they are still not the place where one could store or collect true qi. Rash action would lead to headaches. Progenitor orifices are the Ren and Du channels' most important junctures; if concentrated qi manage to enter the progenitor orifices, two channels Ren and Du would circle endlessly.

But the place where one could really condense the true qi is dantian at the lower abdomen; it is like the supply station of the true qi for the entire body.

Ordinary people's qi meridian is like food that they consume, the stomach wall will ingest and turn it into nutrients.

But internal energy cultivation would turn power-reproducing qi essence into refined, as well as true, qi, which, at the end, would turn into power. This was called 'perfecting essence transforming qi, perfecting qi transforming spirit'.

As for the biggest difference between 'nature' and 'nurture', the innate [nature] can absorb the heaven and earth's energy, but the nurtured will have to stop at the qi essence in itself; therefore, there is distinct difference between the two, which is beyond logical calculation.

As the sea of qi, dantian is subdivided into four layers of heavens.

The topmost layer is Huang Ting [lit. yellow main hall], followed by Jin Lu [lit. golden stove/furnace], Jin Xue [lit. advance/increase acupoint], and the bottommost layer leads directly to Guan Yuan [primary pass] of testicles or uterus.

The one life and death orifice pointing to was precisely the Jin Xue. Among those that the qi moves, one becomes life and death orifice, or just plain Jin Xue.

If the progenitor orifice is the Heaven, then life and death orifice is the Earth. The top concerns character, the bottom concerns life. Character and Life must both be cultivated. Just like rudder and oar, one cannot work without the other.

The so-called ‘under the heaven above the ground progenitor orifice is safe and secure, the sun on the west the moon on the east amassing Jin Xue’ is talking about their relation, which is as close as lips and teeth.

The most formidable aspect of what Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong were doing was assembling the vortex of qi from two boys’ entire strength, and injecting it into Wanwan’s Jin Xue.

Supposing Wanwan practiced fraud, the true qi she received by unfathomably secret means would gather in the depths of her Jin Xue; in which case the invading vortex of qi would definitely stimulate her own true qi to react. If that happened, she would then expose the fox’s tail [idiom, meaning ‘revealing one’s evil nature’].

If she were really innocent, the vortex of qi would trigger her meridian qi, and thus stimulate her to regain her consciousness.

By lucky coincidence, the two boys were finally able to find the best method to test whether she was real or fraud.

Just like Xu Ziling had said, in this battle they were breaking a new path.

While they were at the most intense juncture, Hou Xibai on the outside was leisurely calm; completely unaffected by the thunderstorm, he continued, “Miss’ qinggong is superior, something that Zaixia barely see in all my life. Therefore, each time Zaixia want to see Miss, I always ended up unfortunate and never see your face. However, tonight in this abandoned village, under particular circumstances, if Zaixia want to see Miss’ beautiful face, I am afraid I won’t have the opportunity.”

By this time, the vortex of qi had entered Wanwan’s dantian, and arrived at the first layer Huang Ting; they have not found anything unusual.

Although Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling could not split their attention, they still could not help to be baffled.

If this woman’s qinggong was as superior as Hou Xibai said, why were they able to detect the tiny bit of noise she made as her feet were touching the roof tiles?

The woman responded, “Magnificent real man ought not force others, right? Just now I deliberately made some noise, precisely to let you know that I have arrived. I was seriously considering whether I should show myself to you, but turns out you are this overbearing.”

Kou Zhong, two people shivered in fear; they could not help having a whole new level of respect for Hou Xibai. Just now they could barely hear the sound of footsteps from inside the house, but Hou Xibai was fighting a life and death bloody battle with the enemy, not to mention thunderstorm occurred at the same time, the distance was several folds farther than where they were, yet it did not escape his ears. Just from this fact, it could be inferred that Hou Xibai was superior to them.

The vortex of qi was flowing down slowly, entering the second layer, Jin Lu.

Hou Xibai spoke indifferently, “If Miss really have the intention to see Zaixia, Zaixia will be extremely delighted. Is it possible for you to grant me to know your fragrant name first? That way I will be able to address you a little bit more intimately.”

This man spoke elegantly, his intonation gentle and soft, his manner cool and easygoing; no wonder he was able to make beautiful women all over the world admiring him whole-heartedly.

Apparently the woman was delighted to be coaxed by him; she said cheerfully, "I will only say it once; you ought not be negligent and forget it."

With an incomparably sincere and touching tone Hou Xibai said, "Hou Xibai is listening with respectful attention. In the future I will not dare to forget, Miss please set your heart at ease."

Hearing this, Kou Zhong sighed ruefully in his heart.

Upon self-introspection, he knew that he lacked Hou Xibai's suave and convincing manner of speech. No wonder even Shi Feixuan regarded him highly, and let him accompanying her touring the Three Gorges.

On the other hand, Xu Ziling was thinking: if this person's natural disposition was really like that, then nobody could say anything; otherwise, he was just a despicable, evil person.

The woman's fragrant heart seemed to be impressed; she said, "My name is Dugu Feng [phoenix]. Huh? How come your countenance look so strange? You must be familiar with my background."

Hou Xibai sighed and said, "Miss Dugu indeed has well-deserved reputation; just by looking at the change in my eyes you are able to deduce what I feel inside. You are worthy to be called the direct descendant of two families of the pinnacle of knowledge."

Dugu Feng's tone suddenly became very calm, as if she suddenly changed into a different person. "This is rather strange," she said slowly, "I wonder where did Hou Xiong obtain the inside information about me?"

Hou Xibai replied apologetically, "Please forgive Zaixia for not able to disclose

it. Ol' Hou also knew that not only Miss Dugu had surpassed 'Dugu Twin Heroes', Dugu Sheng and Dugu Ba, two Seniors, early on, even your honorable uncle Dugu Shang has also stepped down gracefully. Your competence is approaching You Chuhong; no wonder Zaixia wanted to escape Miss' tracking but it was so difficult to accomplish."

And then his tone turned cold as he went on, "Previously the Ol' Hou was thinking that Miss was a crafty and unruly woman who came because you admire Zaixia's passionate reputation, but now of course I know this way of thinking is gravely mistaken. May I ask Miss Dugu, what noble errand brings you here that unexpectedly you determined to pay such attention to me, Hou Xibai?"

"Please forgive me for not able to disclose it," Dugu Feng responded, "All right! I have to go!"

This moment the vortex of qi finally flowed from Jin Lu into the crucial point life and death Jin Xue.; suddenly an unexpected development occurred.

The vortex of qi did not stop, it continued slipping down and flooded the sea of qi, dantian's lowest layer Guan Yuan, with a potential of leaking and scattering outside the body.

The two boys were immediately spooked out of their minds.

If this really happened, it would be like their many years of painstaking work in cultivating the inner power automatically melt away completely; to return to their original level would require untold time and effort.

No longer listening to the two people's dialog outside, they focused their mind and spirit in determination to pull the vortex of qi back.

Responding to their determination, the vortex of qi rushed back in the form of rapidly swirling column of qi, in reverse of Wanwan's Du channel direction; like a sharp arrow it pierced the Yin Shu channel on the hollow of Xu Ziling's palm.

Split second later, the pillar of qi grew until it spread onto the meridians in two

boys' entire body.

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong's brains were severely shaken with a loud bang; they were both thrown backward and crashed onto the wall, and then slowly slipped down along the wall and crumpled on the ground, with blood seeping out of their eyes, ears, mouth and nose, and their breathing cut off.

Losing Xu Ziling's support, Wanwan, who was still fast asleep, did not fall down.

Like a specter she slowly floated in the air and stood up gracefully in the middle of the room.

Her eyelids opened slowly, revealing a pair of absolutely worthy of her beautiful face, jet-black and shiny, capable of evoking the most beautiful dream ever, eyeballs.

Wanwan slowly turned her tender body around, her gaze was fixed on Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong, who were crumpled on the floor and unable to rise, and sighed softly.

When it appeared that she was about to move toward the two boys, the main door opened, someone burst in, carrying with him the wind and the rain.

Book 9 Chapter 3 – Profiting From A Disaster

Hou Xibai was handsome and tall, his physique perfectly straight and well proportioned. He wore a bamboo rain hat on top his head, but his clothes was Confucian scholar attire, which emphasized his literary talent and style, as well as his intelligence and bravery.

This moment he waved the fan in his hand, making him appeared indescribably elegant above the crowd, so free and easy. His most attractive feature was not only his pair of gentle and soft eyes, yet sharp enough to melt women's hearts, but also the thick black and elegant moustache above his lips, which seemed to eternally frozen with a hint of proud smile, brimming with masculine charms.

He seemed to be very easy to approach, yet there seemed to be an insurmountable distance that kept others at bay.

All these features combined to form his outstanding and out of the ordinarily touching personality traits.

Just now Dugu Feng said she was leaving and she immediately left. Originally he intended to run after her to see what she looked like. But suddenly he heard something unusual and knew that there were people inside the house; hence he came in to look.

This moment his eyes revealed a shocked look. Without blinking he stared at Wanwan, whose elegance and invulnerable figure was comparable to Shi Feixuan's, as if he was completely oblivious of Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's existence.

Wanwan halted her attempt at coming closer to the two boys. With a faint and gentle sigh she said, “I did not have any enmity against you, but the two of you are too formidable, and I promised someone that I would personally take your lives, hence I was forced to make my move. If you still have any grudges in the Nine Springs [underworld/Hades], you may direct your hatred to me!”

Standing behind her, Hou Xibai said in trembling voice, “Just by listening to Miss’ heavenly music voice, ah ...”

Very casually, yet with immortal-like beauty, Wanwan gracefully turned around to meet Hou Xibai face-to-face.

Hou Xibai’s entire body shook; unexpectedly he was rendered speechless. His eyes shot a disbelief, excited look. But any spectator would be able to read from his eyes, ‘Unexpectedly there is such peerless beauty like this in the world’.

Wanwan cast him a serene glance as she moved toward the door.

Immediately Hou Xibai was overcome with a feeling that he did not dare to be disrespectful toward her, and stepped aside to get out of her way.

Wanwan stopped in front of Hou Xibai, turning her gaze toward the wind and the rain outside, she said in a low voice, “Would you bury them for me?”

This moment Hou Xibai was staring blankly at her out-of-the-worldly refined side silhouette, smelling the natural fragrance emitted by her long, beautiful hair.

Because Wanwan was about a cun shorter than him, he could almost whisper in her sparkling and translucent, finer than jade, small ear, “Miss! They ...”

Wanwan let out another gentle sigh to interrupt him, and then she spoke softly, “Don’t be negligent and forget it, I will remember you!”

That was the words Dugu Feng said to him just now.

While Hou Xibai was at a loss of how to respond, a shadow flashed, Wanwan floated out the door and into the wind and the rain outside.

Hou Xibai was shocked. He darted to the door but was still one step too late; a flash of lightning struck the mountaintop nearby, the entire village was rocked by the sudden clap of thunder that ensued. Wanwan had already disappeared without any trace.

Hou Xibai slumped to his knees in the storm, he did not care that his feet were covered in rain-soaked mud. Looking up to the sky, he let the arrow-like raindrops shot onto his face as he said with a sigh, "Feixuan, oh, Feixuan! Do you know that someone with appearance and martial art skill well matched to yours really exists in the world? Your worthy match has finally appeared."

As if suddenly remembering something, he hurried back into the house, totally disregarding Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling crumpled against the wall, he took out his painting tools and drew something right in the middle of his folding fan.

This fan's other side already had over twenty full body portraits of beautiful women, but this side was completely blank. If Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were not incapable of talking, they would have asked him why there was no portrait of Shi Feixuan on it.

Soon afterwards Wanwan came alive on the fan. Not only it had physical and spiritual resemblance to the real thing, even her ethereal characteristics were captured entirely, not a single one was missing. The lines were concise and strong, sharp like a blade.

Unable to take his eyes off the fan, Hou Xibai played with it for a while. Finally he folded the fan back and absentmindedly stepped out of the door.

The wind and the rain suddenly made him remember Wanwan's request just now. Going back swiftly, 'Bang!' he crashed his back against the wall next to the door.

With his extremely overbearing power, the wall collapsed.

Hou Xibai charged inside the house, consecutively sent out four palm strikes, hitting the four main pillars supporting the building.

By the time the pillars started to crumble, Hou Xibai soared into the air and forcibly knocked against the main beam, and carried the broken beam to break the roof tiles down, while he himself continued to shoot out into the stormy sky above. The house caved in with a loud bank, burying Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling deep under the roof tiles, bricks and wood fragments.

Without looking back, Hou Xibai let out a long whistle and flew far away.

If he were willing to look closely, he would have found out that Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong, two people's bodies, one was burning hot, the other was cold like ice and snow; totally unlike two corpses without any life in it.

Even Wanwan would not have imagined this change.

The storm continued all day long. Only by dusk the following day the sky returned to normal.

The bright moon behind the eastern mountain revealed its immortal countenance.

Under the rubble, Kou Zhong's big head was resting on the pit of Xu Ziling's stomach, while his back was pressing against the beam. There were countless crushed bricks and shattered roof tiles around; fortunately the beam protected the two boys from the collapsed wall, so that the two boys' head and face did not suffer any damage, while still had a bit of breathing space.

Kou Zhong shuddered and spit the sand and mud out of his mouth. He grumbled, "Female demon is formidable, but she also gave us a bit of advantage."

As he stretched out his limbs, the sand and stones above rained down on him. "His granny's Niang," he cursed softly, "My whole body feels like I have shed my mortal body and exchanged my bones. Before, the true qi inside my body was

just like countless threads forming a beam of qi force; but now these threads are swirling like vortices traveling along my meridians and acupoints. Not only the speed increasing, it also feels like I suddenly gain several years of cultivated power. It is immensely enjoyable.”

As a matter of fact, the two boys had always been awake the whole time; they merely stopped their breathing from the mouth and nose.

When the vortex of qi turned into spiraling-whirlpool-like beam piercing their meridians, they really thought that this time their lives would be gone, especially with that kind of feeling, where their meridians were about to burst, which was more than they could bear.

But they did not die, simply because the vortex of qi that circulated around more than a hundred times back and forth between the two of them was gradually reverted back into their Jin Xue.

The strangest thing was that each time the spiraling beam entered Kou Zhong’s body, it immediately became incomparably cold, but when it went back to Xu Ziling’s body, this extreme cold turned into extreme heat.

In this way, one cold and one hot cycled back and forth, even the meridians which previously were not linked up or they even aware of, were broken through and became wide open, just like the barren hill in the wilderness was reclaimed as fertile farming field.

The situation was like sending out old qi to welcome the new qi. Not only Wanwan has never thought about it, even if all the Zen and Taoist masters, plus the martial art grandmasters, of the world were gathered together, they would remain puzzled after pondering this never-happened-in-Wulin-world matter a hundred times.

Xu Ziling blew a mouthful of air and said, “When these brick debris and wood fragments were pressing down on us, it felt very comfortable, just like several dozens of people came to give us massage.”

And then, after a short pause he smiled wryly and said, “In the end, did we win

against that female demon, or did we lose?"

Kou Zhong breathed the evening breeze blowing through the cracks amidst the broken down bricks; he muttered, "On the surface it does seem like a crushing defeat; at least the siren thought so. But she is very crafty; unexpectedly she knew the 'capturing interest first' tactic. First she misled us into thinking that the vortex of qi was going to escape out of the body, and then we were trying to pull back the vortex of qi in panic, she pushed the boat with the current and slammed the vortex of qi into our bodies, hence as easy as blowing off dust she reversed our vortex of qi and used it against us."

Xu Ziling shuddered in fear, "That was an extremely dangerous moment. Were it not for that idiot Hou Xibai barging in, she would have come to check on us, and then she would know and give us each a palm strike. If that happened, we would have gone to the netherworld to accompany Niang!"

Kou Zhong acted as if he was listening intently. "Don't move!" he hissed, "Looks like someone's coming."

Xu Ziling listened carefully; aghast, he said, "Why does our sense of hearing become this formidable? The hoof beats are at least ten li away, yet we can perceive it. Before, we could hear only at most five or six li, and it had to be under favorable wind direction."

Kou Zhong was tongue-tied as well. "And don't forget that right now we are buried under the rubble," he said, "Hey! The sound must be coming from the underground; I can even feel the vibration."

Xu Ziling chuckled softly, "You, this kid, love to exaggerate the most," he said, "Huh? They seem to be in great rush. Eleven, twelve, oh! Seventeen riders, and they are heading this way."

Kou Zhong squealed excitedly, "Let's play dead again! Who knows, maybe we'll gain another unexpected benefit."

As soon as the riders entered the village, most of them immediately dismounted from their horses to stick torches everywhere, and then started

searching from house to house, in a tyrannical, overbearing manner.

Hidden under the rubble, when Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong heard the way they were forcing the doors open, breaking down walls, and basically forcing their way into the houses everywhere, they knew that this bunch of people was not ordinary Jianghu characters; rather, they could be considered martial art masters of the Wulin.

Under normal circumstances, it would not be easy to meet even one of this kind of people, yet now suddenly more than a dozen appeared here and with impressive show of force searched the entire village; naturally the two boys were greatly curious.

Two of the riders did not dismount, evidently their rank was the highest. Urging their horses, they slowly came near the rubble where the two boys were buried.

One of these two was fat, the other thin, but both had unusual look. The fat one's body type was big and loose, yet surprisingly it still gave other people the impression that he was sturdy, healthy and beautiful. His age was around thirty, his skin was abnormally bright.

He was gifted with a broad face and bulging chin; his eyes were as sharp as a pair of will-o'-the-wisp, with a bit of sinister and terrifying aggressiveness. Fortunately from time to time his thin lips pursed into a thread of smiling expression, and thus greatly diluted the burning murderous aura from his eyes.

The skinny one was a few years younger than the fat one. His build was well proportionately slender, his face was rather handsome, but his bearing looked conceited.

After looking around for quite some time, he finally opened his mouth, "This clay house must have collapsed not too long ago, that's why the interior has not been eroded by the blowing sand, the furniture still considerably intact, plus the two rear buildings are still standing straight. The collapsing front part is indeed very intriguing."

His voice was deep and low, and was pleasant to hear, plus he spoke with confidence, giving the impression that he was someone who seldom suffered setbacks.

The fat and sturdy guy laughed aloud and said, “Ling Feng Xiong’s observation is a valid one. Just by looking at the dead bodies scattered all around the village, we know that something happened here not long ago. Also, looking at the way this house collapsed, it is obvious that someone deliberately smashed the beams and pillars, and pushed the four walls down.”

Listening from under the rubble, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were moved by these two men’s power of observation.

The one called Ling Feng smiled and said, “Jin Bo Xiong is well-known for your intelligence; indeed it is not a baseless information. This is very strange; who would spend so much effort to knock the entire building down? Plus this person must be very powerful; I daresay he can be classified as one of the top-ranking experts of the martial art world.”

The fat guy Jin Bo responded indifferently, “As long as we excavate the debris, we will obtain the answer. Is Ling Xiong interested?”

This moment a short, thin old man came to the two men’s presence and said in heavy voice, “There are a total of fourteen dead bodies in the village. Most died from having their vital acupoint sealed with some kind of internal school’s technique. Only three of them died from having their throat cut, but the wound does not look like it was caused by sharp object, such as a saber or a sword.”

“Who are these people?” Ling Feng asked, “Can Old Chen see?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling felt strange. Listening to the appellation these people used to address each other, it was obvious that they did not belong to the same School or Sect; there was no superior-subordinate relationship between them, yet it was clear from their attitude that they were in this together. What was their objective?

The old man surnamed Chen replied, “All their weapons have the identical

markings. If my, Chen Guang's memory serves me right, they must be Jiangnan's Qingjiang Pai's people, whose power is increasing tremendously these recent days."

"Phew!" Jin Bo said with a sigh, "This is getting more and more interesting! Qingjiang Pai's Zhangmen [Sect Leader] 'Variable Wind' [wu ding feng – no fixed wind] Xiang Qingliu loves to shield his people who break the law and commit crimes, and now unexpectedly someone is daring enough to stroke the tiger's whisker. I, the 'Fat Demon' Jin Bo dare to guarantee that a good drama is about to unfold. It must be lively and good to watch. Ha!"

Listening to his mouthful 'taking joy in calamity and delight in disaster' tone, Xu and Kou, two people could not help feeling contempt toward him.

Puzzled, Ling Feng asked, "But this bunch of people did not work under those two kids; who could have done it to them?"

The two boys listening under the rubble were moved. They had a faint feeling that these men were coming for them.

Meanwhile another man came to report that there was no one else in the village.

Jin Bo sighed and said, "Right now we don't have time to mind other people's business. The intelligence from Baling was that those two kids are heading north to dig up the 'Duke Yang Treasure'. This information has spread everywhere, creating quite a sensation. Even the Four Big Bandits are sending their martial art masters to intercept along the way. Even more reason for us not to dilly-dally."

Chen Guang said, "There has never been anybody in Jianghu with higher price than theirs. Undoubtedly, obtaining the hidden treasure is not insignificant; we can immediately recruit soldiers and buy provision to contend for hegemony over the world, or at least we can become the richest man in the world. Let alone we can bring their heads to see Duke Mi. It will definitely bring honor to our ancestors."

Immediately Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's countenance changed.

Their northern expedition was a top secret. Only a limited number of Baling Bang and Jukun Bang people were in the know. But now they had just left Baling, and already someone has leaked the news. Not only that, but their route to the north was clearly indicated. Otherwise, how could these people look for them here?

Ling Feng's voice was heard, "We must leave immediately and hasten on our journey; otherwise the quick-footed will climb up first!"

Jin Bo and the others were too preoccupied to care about what buried under the rubble; in the blink of an eye they already left far away.

'Bang!'

Gravels shot up midway into the sky. The two boys soared high and landed on a vacant lot in the middle of the village.

Brushing off the sand, pebbles and dust from his clothes, Kou Zhong frowned and said, "Dust and debris are getting into my clothes; it's really uncomfortable. It would be best if we can find a creek to take a bath before continuing on our journey."

Xu Ziling nodded, "We'll look for one along the way. The most important thing right now is going to Jingling to rendezvous with Yucheng, Zhifu, and the others, and then think of a way to deal with this situation."

Patting the Moon in the Well on his back, Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "It had not occurred to me that our prestige from getting rid of Ren Shaoming is still not enough to intimidate and deter those greedy people. We might as well have a free hand to go all out; let those people know the meaning of the word 'regret'."

Xu Ziling smiled faintly and led away.

By this time the bright moon had climbed up to its zenith, bathing the whole earth with its golden light.

Book 9 Chapter 4 – Flying Horse Ranch

One after another the two boys emerge from the water of a small lake. Their clothes that have been washed clean were hanging on a small tree by the lake.

Looking at the bright moon in the sky above, Kou Zhong sighed and said, “We have not bathed in a creek like this for a long time! If Niang were still here watching us, how wonderful that is?”

Xu Ziling pushed the water with both hands; his eyes revealed a sad look. He did not respond.

Stark naked, Kou Zhong climbed onto a flat and smooth big rock by the lake; he said, “Could it be that Xiao Xian is secretly betraying us? Only by Xiang Yushan’s intelligence network will he be able to spread the information this fast.”

“That is a very high possibility,” Xu Ziling agreed, “If it were other people, they might be afraid of spreading the news, because someone else might beat them to it [again, the original was ‘the quick-footed climb up first’].”

Kou Zhong stood up on the big rock; assuming a perfect diving posture, he leaned his head aside in deep thought, “But what benefit could Xiao Xian reap? Supposing the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’ fell into someone else’s hands, he would only suffer harm without any advantage whatsoever.”

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, “For an old fox like Xiao Xian, it is very difficult to guess what kind of crafty scheme he is running. Perhaps he wanted us to sound out the difficulties and retreat to avoid defeat, and obediently come back to rely on his help. Naturally we would offer the secret of ‘Duke Yang Treasure’ in

return!”

Kou Zhong’s heart was moved, “This guess is quite reasonable,” he said. Rising up high, he dove into the water.

Seeing how much fun Kou Zhong was having by diving into the water, Xu Ziling imitated him by climbing onto the rock, and then deliberately made a cannonball dive into the lake, splashing water high into the air.

Swimming toward him, Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Ling Shao seems to be in a very good mood.”

Xu Ziing cheerfully replied, “Why should I be unhappy? The female demon’s identity is discovered, our strength is increasing considerably, we have confidence to deal with any powerful enemy; tell me, why should we be worry?”

Kou Zhong had a brainwave, “Do you want to test the extend of our formidability now?” he asked.

Xu Ziling looked as if he was returning to the playful mood of his childhood; he said, “Zhong Shao, do you have any good suggestion?”

Kou Zhong smiled and said, “Those seventeen idiots just now seemed to be people of real skill. If we go over the hill to pursue them, we might still be able to intercept them; while we are at it, seizing two horses from them seems to be a good idea. Ling Shao, do you have a better suggestion?”

Xu Ziling laughed aloud and said, “How could I dare to offer any suggestion? Now, let us have a race on putting on our clothes first, and then we’ll compete on our legs’ strength; what do you say?”

Kou Zhong squealed. Laughing and giggling, the two boys raced each other to climb up the soft green lake bank, without showing any sign that they were two martial art masters.

The first light of dawn.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling sat side-by-side by the roadside, with their backs against a huge old polar tree, which trunk was so big that it would require several people to wrap their arms around it. Glowing with health and vigor they nibbled on fresh fruits they picked on the mountain along the way. In short, they looked very relaxed and comfortable.

A faint sound of hoof beats was coming from the other end of the road.

Spitting the pit of the fruit, Kou Zhong proudly said, "The fools delivering horses are here. We must interrogate them where they heard the news about us from."

Xu Ziling mused, "They must have rested along the way; otherwise, there is no reason for them to fall behind us this long."

Kou Zhong sneered and said, "Why do we care his mother's business? This kind of reckless fellows is only good for me to test my saber."

Frowning, Xu Ziling said, "Since when did you become so blood-thirsty? Unless we absolutely have to, it would be best if we don't kill anybody. This is called 'amassing secret virtue'. Understand?"

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "Xu Ye's admonishment is right, how could this kid dare to disobey? Hey! Since our debut, may I ask when did I ever willfully slaughter the innocent?"

Xu Ziling replied crossly, "Who are the innocents? Wasn't it you, Kou Daye who decided based on your own idea?"

Kou Zhong was speechless for half a day. Finally he had a sudden understanding and said, "Your comment is very interesting. When all is said and done, all the strife in the world can be regarded as some kind of ideological struggle." And then after a short pause he said, "Everybody has his own set of ideas, wishing other people would accept it, and thus the struggle starts. Take that Li kid for example: he has Li kid's way of thinking. I, Kou Zhong, also have a set of my own. Whoever prevails, it does not matter if the other side submits

willingly or not, they still have to accept the victor's way of thinking, or else they will have to be eliminated. Of course, I am referring to the kind of situation that can only occur where everybody has the same goal but different standpoints. Otherwise, just like you and me, river water will never offend the well water."

Xu Ziling laughed and said, "Aren't you just babbling nonsense? Such a simple idea and you make it so complicated. Direct and plainspoken is still the best. There is only one Emperor's throne, and only one person can sit on it. Isn't this clearly understood?"

Kou Zhong responded with serious expression, "Actually, I was thinking about another issue, that is, if we want to vie for the world, we must have a perfect set of ideas first, so that others will be comfortable in following it. This set of ideas includes a complete plan, an ideal, even future's distribution of power, and the style to rule the country. This is called having a clear-cut stand. Otherwise, it would be just like the Four Bandits; from top to bottom, nobody knows what he is doing."

And then, bumping Xu Ziling with his elbow, he smiled mysteriously and said, "Like Li Mi previously published Ten Charges of Yang Guang. He was announcing to the whole world that if he, Li Mi, became the Emperor, he would never repeat these chronic illnesses of Yang Guang. Therefore, his reputation soared immediately, his influence expanded greatly, all without even need to spend a great deal of effort or waste a soldier or half a troop. What a deal."

Xu Ziling was emotionally moved; he said, "You, this kid, indeed have some ideas."

The hoof beats were getting closer.

Kou Zhong sprang up and stood in the middle of the road, in full anticipation of the enemy soon to appear from the road bend ahead.

Xu Ziling was still sitting peacefully, eating the last wild peach.

Kou Zhong pricked up his ear and listened carefully, he detected at least thirty horses; perhaps the enemy rendezvous with their reinforcement somewhere

that their number increased by one fold. The only thing puzzling him was that the hoof beats varied; some were heavy and some were light.

Even though the enemy's strength increased tremendously, Kou Zhong found it to be more interesting.

Like meteors catching up with the moon, the true qi within him spiraled back and forth between his tianling, yongquan and various acupoints, so that his entire body, from head to toe, was brimming with explosive, as well as incomparably cold, power. His mind became even more still and cold, without a single thread of disturbing emotions.

So much so that he did not even feel his 'self' existence, just like the clear water in a deep well, which could only reflect the world objectively.

This kind of perception preserved several breaths of circumstances; he was 'awakened' and returned to the previous state of mind. It was just like from the Heaven returning to the Earth, back to his true character.

While Kou Zhong was about to discuss this feeling with Xu Ziling, the enemies' two front-most riders have already appeared from the bend.

Furthermore, as soon as Kou Zhong entered this fantastic realm, Xu Ziling's mind also produced immediate reaction.

Within these several breaths of time period, Kou Zhong was plainly standing in the middle of the road, but Xu Ziing had a mysterious, strange perception that Kou Zhong has turned into a formless entity. He even could no longer feel the cold air emitted from Kou Zhong's body, a clear sign of his existence.

And then a moment later everything was back to normal. Kou Zhong was looking at him, agape and tongue-tied, with astonishment on his face.

The riders continuously entered the road.

The galloping riders were men in grey warrior-style uniform; the top of their

lapels was embroidered with flying horse with a pair of wings on their back. There were a total of twelve men, plus more than a dozen wild horses without saddles, strung together with a rope.

Seeing Kou Zhong still standing in the middle of the road with blank bird-brained expression, Xu Ziling cried out, "Wrong persons! Come back here!"

By now the troop of galloping riders that drove the wild horses was only about two zhang away from Kou Zhong. The leading rider was a middle-aged robust man with only one eye. His countenance looked old and dull, but his single eye was still flickering lively. Seeing someone barring their way, he shouted his order telling the men behind him to rein their horses and slow down.

As if he had just been awakened from a dream, Kou Zhong bowed respectfully with clasped hands toward that man to express his apology, before awkwardly returning to Xu Ziling's side, while still waving his hand telling the other side to go on with their journey.

The robust middle-aged man already reined his horse abruptly, so that it reared on its hind legs and stopped.

Seeing this, the other men also reined their horses and stopped about a zhang away on the road in front of the two boys.

Twelve men, twenty-three eyes, like twenty-three arrows landed on the two boys. Even the horses puffing white steam from their nostrils were casting their eyes warily on the two boys.

Kou Zhong knew he was in the wrong; laughing apologetically he said, "We mistook you for someone else, would gentlemen be magnanimous and forgive us?"

A short and thin old man by the one-eyed man took out a tobacco pipe from the saddlebag hanging on the horse's belly. Chuckling sinisterly, he said, "Good kid, looking at your dignified manner and handsome faces, you have the appearance of amazing people, yet instead of learning something good, you learned to be low-class thieves who waylay and rob people on their journey. Now

that you've seen that we are not to be trifled with, you retreat hastily. Don't you have any shame?"

Other than the one-eyed man, the rest of the men roared in laughter, ridiculing and mocking them to their heart's content.

Kou Zhong was indeed a strange person; although the opposite side was laughing and hurling insults at them, realizing that it was just a misunderstanding, surprisingly he did not take any offence. Smiling, he said, "This Senior is mistaken. What we, two brothers, disdain the most is the conduct of bandits who rob traveling folks. It was just a misunderstanding."

Another man taunted, "Whether you want to be a bandit or not, it's just a question of eligibility. But just by looking at the saber on your back, which will easily tempt you to be one, I know that you are indeed a low-class thief ... Ha ..."

Everybody roared in laughter again. Several of them even drew their weapons, ready to fight.

Someone even went as far as shouting toward Xu Ziling, who was still sitting undauntedly on the ground, "You, that kid, you still have not come over here to kneel, begging for forgiveness?"

Xu Ziling rose up slowly. Patting the dust from his clothes, without even looking at the opposite party he said to Kou Zhong, "Let's go!"

While puffing smoke from his pipe, the little old man laughed coldly and said, "You think it's that easy to leave? North of the River, who dares to block our, Flying Horse Ranch's way?"

The other men shouted and cursed at once, while quickly spreading out to surround the two boys, in a way that could be described as 'operation storm'.

Kou Zhong turned to Xu Ziling and said with a wry smile, "Nothing we can do about it!"

Someone with peculiar voice interrupted, "You got that right! Perhaps we, two low-class thieves, better kneel down to beg for forgiveness! Maybe big masters of Flying Horse Ranch would show us some clemency?"

He was imitating Xu Ziling's accent in responding Kou Zhong's remark, and he was dead on, which, quite naturally, drawing another round of laughter and mockery.

Xu Ziling casually turned his gaze toward the speaker. Turned out he was a young man about 17 or 18 years old, the youngest among the riders, dark-skinned from being under the sun a lot, but his teeth were snow white and neat, so that his cannot-be-considered-good-looking countenance was a lot nicer to look at. This moment he was sticking out his chin and narrowing his eyes in a mocking expression.

Suddenly someone thundered, "Don't be reckless!"

Everybody, including Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, were stunned.

The speaker was precisely the one-eyed man. This moment he was staring hard at Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling, sizing them up. He said toward the little old man, who was swallowing clouds and blowing out fog from his tobacco pipe, with a heavy voice, "Has Xu Gong [term of respect to address an elderly man] seen any low-class thief, who, under heavy siege, still have calm demeanor, and is still able to talk cool-headedly like them?"

The old man surnamed Xu looked startled, and then he turned his gaze toward the two boys, examining them closely. His eyes showed that he was deep in thought.

The other men did not dare to make any noise. Obviously the one-eyed man was their boss.

The one-eyed man seemed to appreciate the two boys very much; he smiled and said, "I am Flying Horse Ranch's Er Zhishi [second manager; zhishi basically means 'doing/carrying out matters'] Liu Zongdao. This time due to our Dangjia [chief] entrusted heavy responsibility, we take special care along the way."

After a short pause, he went on, “Although two gentlemen’s clothing is ragged, it is still cannot hide your dignified bearing; I wonder what are gentlemen’s honored surnames and great given names? Where are you from? What business do you have here?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling could not help having favorable impression toward this man, it’s just that naturally they could not reveal their real identity to him. They only wished to perfunctorily pass this encounter and go their separate ways.

Accustomed to inventing crazy nonsense, without even thinking Kou Zhong replied, “Someone who understands reason like Er Zhishi is hard to come by. We, two brothers are from the same village, the Fu family village in Yuhang. His name is Fu Jing, and I am Fu Ning.” [Translator’s note: Characters Fu from Fu Junchuo, Jing from Shan Wanjing, and Ning from Li Xiuning.]

Liu Zong Dao was emotionally moved; he said, “You made light of traveling a thousand li, what is your purpose?”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “What else but to find support for our lives by joining a militia, wishing that in the future we can stand out among our peers, and bring honor to our ancestors, so that our parents [Translator’s note: the words here indicate that they were paternal cousins] can pass their days in peace and happiness.”

This time, even the old man surnamed Xu believed him. Nodding his head, he said, “Younger generation kids should have high aspiration. Listening to your refined style of conversation, I am sure you have had several books to read?”

Kou Zhong blurted out without thinking, “Old Xu is indeed formidable; just by listening to a couple of words from us you are already very clear about our foundation. In our neighboring village, there was this Kou Laoyezi [polite appellation for an elderly male] who has read intensively the Book of Songs and the Book of History. He is a kind old man, as long as on holidays we delivered two catties of dried meat to him, he was willing to teach us to read, to study all those ‘Four Common Characters of Classical Chinese’, ‘Isn’t That a Joy?’ [quote from Confucius], and so on.”

Being flattered like that, the old man Xu was immediately elated, “Now here’s a little boy who is worth teaching! Ha ha!”

The youngest, the smart aleck guy said, “The ones you were waiting for must be that militia you are talking about!”

“It was,” Kou Zhong replied with a forced laugh, “We heard Li Mi’s army might be passing by here; who would have thought that it was all of you, Daye.”

Amused, Liu Zongdao smiled and said, “Li Mi is way too busy right now, how could he have time to mind the South? So what did you do for a living?”

Reaching out and grabbing Xu Ziling’s shoulders, Kou Zhong said, “We, two brothers, are expert in providing meals for the important generals. All those dumpling oil rice, dumpling oil cake [see Book 1 Chapter 9], ours is the most famous. Ha!”

Liu Zongdao appeared to be slightly moved; after exchanging a glance with the old man Xu, he said, “Seeing that the two of you have spirit and a face of righteousness, I wonder if you are interested to become chefs for our troops and earn money. Our Changzhu [ranch master] loves to eat dumpling oil cake. As long as you can satisfy her taste, I guarantee that several years later you can go back to your hometown in silken robes; won’t it surpass earning a living by fighting life and death battle? However, if Changzhu is not satisfied with your craftsmanship, the two gentlemen will have to pack up and go home immediately.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were stunned; both thought that their joke seemed to backfire. While they were about to decline, the old man Xu said with a laugh, “It’s very rare that Er Zhishi would make an exception and give you recommendation; your family must have amassed virtue as high as the mountain. Our Flying Horse Ranch’s name shakes the area north of the River, even Li Mi came to us to buy war horses and equipment; if you don’t believe me, feel free to ask around.”

Kou Zhong’s eyes immediately lit up; staring at the old man Xu with his big

eyes, he murmured, "War horse?"

One of the riders sneered and said, "Kid, you really have eyes without eyeballs. This time we travel to the frontier, is precisely to get these more than a dozen barbarian horse pedigrees to breed. You get it?"

Sucking a deep breath of air Kou Zhong said, "Liu Zhishi has shown such a high regard to us, two brothers, a benevolence and kindness that is hard to forget even after our teeth fall out; but is it possible for us to discuss this matter in private first?"

Liu Zongdao did not think of anything out of ordinary, "Of course I understand," he said, "Two Xiao Xiongdi, take your time!"

Kou Zhong hastily pulled Xu Ziling a bit farther up and said, "Since we are not doing anything right now, why not go to their ranch to look around?"

Knitting his brows, Xu Ziling said, "Aren't you forgetting something? Yucheng and the others are waiting for us in Jingling."

"Just give me ten days," Kou Zhong asked earnestly, "Consider it we accidentally lose our way!"

Left without any choice, Xu Ziling helplessly agreed.

Kou Zhong's spirit rose up immediately; striding toward Liu Zongdao, he cupped his fist and said, "Thank you very much for Liu Zhishi's guidance!"

The old man Xu gladly replied on his behalf, "No need to mention sentimental words, get on the horse!"

The young man cried out enthusiastically, "Xiao Ning, you can ride with me!"

Xu Ziling was grateful inwardly that these people were not loathsome; otherwise the next ten days would be very difficult to endure.

Book 9 Chapter 5 – Room For Hegemony

West and south of Jingling County, the Yangtze River and its two tributaries, the Zhang Shui and the Ju Shui form a delta of fertile land. As the two rivers flowing through, they irrigate good agricultural land on both sides, before finally converge into the Great River.

The climate here is mild, the soil fertile, natural resources abundant. Flying Horse Ranch was located in such open country. The pasture was particularly rich, all four sides were bordered by mountains, surrounding a fertile land of more than ten li in either direction. There were only two gorges to the east and to the west providing access. The ranch was an inaccessible stronghold with the protection of natural barriers.

After entering the mountain pass with the team of riders, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling reached the mountain ridge where they could have a bird's-eye view of the ranch. They saw piece after piece of cultivated lands, big and small, were covering the valley below, forming beautiful patterns like a quilt; they could not help feeling carefree and relaxed.

On the pasture full of beautiful colors: dark green, light green, umber-black dye, in all kinds of hues stitched together, more than a dozen mirror-like lakes of various shapes and sizes dotted the land. The deep-green color of the water of the lakes vying against the dark-green color of the grass to be the most glamorous, with their flowing light and overflowing color, full of life and beauty that the two boys held their breath in admiration.

No matter from whichever angle they looked, the border of the grassland was an endless line of undulating mountain peaks, stretching as far as their eyes could see.

In this fairy-land that resembled the Garden of the Peaches of Immortality, countless poultry and livestock roamed around freely: white sheep, brown or grey cows, all kinds of horses; adding even more color to the already-saturated beautiful prairie.

The northwest corner was comparatively higher than the rest. A magnificent castle was built there, with its back against the steep wall of ten thousand fathoms precipice, and its front overlooking a winding-like-a-piece-of-ribbon brook, making it even more spectacular.

By this time everybody dismounted from the horses and continued on foot. Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling walked in the middle; looking around, they were ecstatic, almost felt that this trip has not been made in vain.

The things Kou Zhong noted were the construction of the fortress and its strategic points, as well as the sentry platforms and lookout stations, while Xu Ziling was single-mindedly enjoying the beautiful and picturesque scenery.

The exit to the gorge was equipped with a city gate tower, with a trench, three zhang wide and five zhang deep dug in front of it, crossing the gorge outlet. The bottom of the trench was full of sharp spikes, so the only way in was via the drawbridge. It was indeed a 'one man can defend it, ten thousand men cannot cross' situation.

Upon entering the grazing land, it was obvious that Liu Zongdao and the others became more relaxed; everybody was chatting and laughing loudly as if they had just laid down the heavy burden on their backs.

Mounting their horses again, they galloped toward the castle along the gravel road.

Different types of farm animals were separated by wooden fence. The shepherds were rushing back and forth between the wooden fence, shouting repeatedly. The farmers were working quietly on the fields, occasionally the low mooing of the plowing ox blended with the neighing of the horses and the bleating of the sheep.

Along the way, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling gained further understanding of this seemingly standing-alooof-from-worldly-affairs Flying Horse Ranch.

The founder of this Flying Horse Ranch, the first generation Ranch Master Shang Xiong was a military leader from the end of the Jin Dynasties [265-420AD]. When Liu Yu broke away from Jin and changed the country's name to Song [of the Southern dynasties (420-479)], the world split up.

Avoiding the disaster of war, Shang Xiong led his troops and clansmen to go down south, and by chance found this hidden valley. Thereupon they decided to live in peace and work happily in here, establishing the Ranch.

From the time the Ranch was founded to the time the Sui Dynasty unified the world, spanning a period of 160 years, the Flying Horse Ranch has had seven different Ranch Master, all from the Shang family clan, passing down from generation to generation, and all had supreme power over the Ranch.

As for the other clans, namely Liang, Liu, Tao, Wu, Xu, Luo, and the others, after more than a century they multiplied and continuously moved out to the surrounding area, forming the villages and towns around the Ranch, so much so that the majority residents of the two big cities by Ju Shui, Yuan'an and Dangyang, were originated from Flying Horse Ranch.

Flying Horse Ranch was also the economic lifeblood of the region. Their product, excellent quality horses, was world-famous. Yet because the Ranch Masters always adhered to the teachings of their ancestors, they did not participate in Jianghu matters, as well as got involved in imperial court. Maintaining a low-key work ethic, they had always been businesspeople; hence the reason Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling never heard about them.

The first generation Ranch Master Shang Xiong was of military background, with deep understanding of punching and kicking principles; hence he encouraged his subordinates and clansmen to research and study martial arts, promoting martial style throughout, so that everybody in the Ranch was strong, brave and adept in warfare, unafraid of bandits and robbers from the outside, and became a force able to ensure the peace and safety of the region, and thus won the veneration of the citizens of the cities and towns in the vicinity. It was

somewhat similar to the role of Duba Village toward Jingling.

Whenever the Flying Horse Ranch was in need of staff, they usually recruited new people from the surrounding area; it was very rare that they would seek employees from different part of the country.

But this time it was a special case; first of all, it was due to Liu Zongdao had a favorable impression as soon as he saw the two boys, but probably more importantly, it was because the Pastry Chef of the Ranch had passed away recently, and none of the new recruits was able to satisfy the female Ranch Master Shang Xiuxun's taste buds. Consecutively more than ten different people have been discharged, prompting Liu Zongdao to invite the two boys to try.

Seen from the front, the Flying Horse mountain city was even more impressive.

The city wall was built following the topography of the mountain, constructed from uneven pile of rocks; it wound and snaked, and went up and down along the steep terrain. Behind the city was bare stratified rock, with cavities perched high into the sky, so that even flying birds would find it difficult to cross.

The troops crossed the river via the suspension bridge, and entered the city. All the bridge guards treated them amiably and enthusiastically, in friendly atmosphere, giving the impression that they were all members of one big family living in harmony with each other.

Beyond the city gate was a wide street sloping upwards, extending to the Ranch Master's inner castle at its highest point. On either side of the road was an unbroken line of houses, with streets and alleys all connected to the sloping road; a distinct characteristic of a mountain city.

Pedestrians and carriages traveled back and forth along the road, as majestic as a thriving metropolis. Flocks of children played noisily, making Kou and Xu to open their eyes wide and click their tongues in wonder, since they had never imagined that such a happy place really existed in the world.

All the buildings were plain and simple, constructed mainly of rocks, but the model was spacious. Bell-shaped pavilions, decorated archways and doors

heavily lined up both sides of the road; plain, unadorned design that clearly defined the grand and heroic spirit of the establishment of the city.

The scale of the inner castle was even grander; the main building complex consisted of five layers of halls and pavilions, plus another side palace hall colonnade. Buildings of various sizes were spread out within the castle complex, everything clear and in good order, linked together by gardens and shrubberies, small bridges and fountains and waterfalls; elegant and graceful.

Upon entering the castle, Liu Zongdao and the old man Xu took the good horses from outside the northern border to see the Ranch Master, but Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling was led by the young fellow Luo Fang toward the Housekeeper Mansion to report for duty.

Due to their lowly position, naturally the two boys did not have the qualification to see the Housekeeper, Shang Zhen. Therefore, they were received by his assistant, Liang Qian, who was in charge of personnel affairs.

This man was around forty-years old, dressed in scholar attire. At first his manner was arrogant, but after hearing Luo Fang's explanation that these two were the Pastry Chef recommended personally by Liu Zongdao, he became rather polite.

After routine interview of the two boys' background, Liang Qian said seriously, "There is one thing that I must make it clear to the two of you: unless Changzhu [Ranch Master] nods her consent, gentlemen's employment here is only probationary. During this probation period, unless under someone else's escort, you are not allowed to leave your lodging house. After you are officially employed here, I will personally go through the Ranch's rules and regulations with you."

Kou Zhong said excitedly, "A country has national laws, a house has family rules; this aspect, we understand clearly. It's just that when can we showcase our unique talents, so that Changzhu get a taste of the goodies we can produce?"

After casting a sidelong glance toward the two boys, Liang Qian asked Luo

Fang, who was standing on the side, “What was Liu Zhishi’s comment on their products?”

Luo Fang replied awkwardly, “Er Zhishi has not tasted their handicraft.”

Liang Qian stared blankly for half a day. His countenance changed, he said, “Why didn’t you tell me earlier? If Changzhu blamed me for dereliction of duty, who would have pity on me?”

Smiling apologetically, Kou Zhong said, “Liang Fu Guanjia [Deputy Housekeeper] may rest assured that we ...”

“Less bullsh1t,” Liang Qian cut him off impatiently, “Right now I’ll have someone take you to have some rest. After making some arrangement, I’ll have someone bring you to the kitchen to see what can you do? We’ll talk again after you pass my test.”

After a pause, he went on with a sympathetic tone, “I want you to be well aware of the situation: I lost track of how many Pastry Chefs, all with experience over ten years more than you have, plus outstanding reputation, yet they absolutely had no luck in this matter at all. Men! Take Xiao Ning and Xiao Ling to the courtyard of the Rear Castle.”

And then, turning to Luo Fang he said, “You are dismissed!”

The courtyard was located east of the Rear Castle. There were more than a dozen buildings in it, and next to it was precisely the kitchen that supplied food to the people of the Inner Castle, from top to bottom. The two boys were placed in a small room in one of the buildings; they also had to change into low-rank Flying Horse Ranch uniform.

Sprawling on the bed, Xu Ziling grumbled, “Thousands and tens of thousands names in the world, why must you pick Fu Jing? People are calling me Xiao Jing, Xiao Jing; so awkward, like I turned into a woman. It also reminded me of Dong Ming Princess.” [Reminder: same Jing character as Shan Wanjing’s name.]

Kou Zhong was leaning against the window, looking out. He said proudly, "You are Xiao Jing, and I am Xiao Ning; both reminded us of people we ought to forget; we are even. Ay! Why am I thinking about these things at time like this? I was just inventing crazy nonsense and blurting out those names, I thought we only had to tell them and be done with it."

And then he became excited as he said, "That day in Cui Shan town when we worked for Ol' Zhang, he often bragged that his dumpling oil rice, jade-well rice are peerless under the heavens [see Book 1 Chapter 9], and now we can confirm whether he indeed has bragging rights."

Xu Ziling chided him gently, "You are right; Ol' Zhang often bragged about his rice dishes, but he had never said his pastries were anything amazing. Ay! You, this kid, also love to brag, and this time you are implicating me that I have to share the humiliation with you."

Kou Zhong stared blankly for half a day. Like a wandering soul he walked over to the bed and sat down. "Logically speaking, Ol' Zhang's pastries can't be that lacking," he muttered to himself, "At least, I think so. Hey! I think they are all very tasty!"

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "Other than being good at consoling yourself, what else can you do? Have you forgotten what that rotten ghost scholar surnamed Liang told us that there are a lot of outstanding pastry chefs who had been sacked and sent home to till their fields? Ol' Zhang is just like you; he loves to brag. Rice dishes he may have a skill or two, but pastry? I'll say even by patting the horse's bottom he won't be able to catch up with big city's or big town's famous masters."

Kou Zhong's countenance changed, "What should we do?" he asked.

Xu Ziling said in an unusual tone, "If you really want to be Pastry Chef in here, I may be able to accompany you. What I am most afraid of is if you are coveting others' ranch, and here to obtain both riches and sex. If that's the case, please forgive Xiaodi for not be able to keep you company!"

Kou Zhong's old face turned slightly red; he said in embarrassment, "Can you

not paint me in such an unbearably light? Most probably that Shang Xiuxun is just another Zhai Jiao; nothing to look at. I only want to build a good relationship with her, so that when I buy horses from her in the future, I can get a bit more discount. That's all!"

Staying calm and composed, Xu Ziling said, "Whatever you say, it's useless. First thing tomorrow morning we have to get out of here; I forbid you from looking at her even for a glance."

'Pow!'

Kou Zhong pummeled Xu Ziling's thigh and cried out, "You have to think of something for me!"

'Ow!' Xu Ziling cried out in pain and dropped back onto the bed. Stroking the sore spot, he moaned, "You wanted to kill me?"

Kou Zhong was skeptical, "Based on your, Ling Shao's power this day and age, a gentle slap could give you that much pain?"

Xu Ziling angrily replied, "Your Niang's gentle slap carried the strength of a vortex of qi. You nearly broke through the qi protecting my body."

Greatly delighted, Kou Zhong was about to speak, when a young woman's voice was speaking angrily from outside the door, "Who's making a big fuss inside? Get your @ss out here right now!"

Stunned, the two boys looked at each other.

The woman shouted again in her tender voice, "If you don't get out, I'll come in and you'll be sorry!"

"We're coming! We're coming!" Kou Zhong replied, "Miss, please calm down, we are just goofing around here!"

The woman said in heavy voice, "The two of you are newcomers from the outside, you think our Ranch is the place to goof around? More bullsh1t and you will be rewarded with ten sticks each according to our rules."

Hearing that, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other in dismay before rushing to the door and out to the corridor.

Standing under the sunshine was a tall and thin, with slender waist like a willow tree, middle-aged woman. Although her overall appearance could be considered all right, her hollow cheeks were dry and heavy, as if she could fly into a rage at any time. With frosty countenance she stared at them.

Her clothes were of gorgeous silk, but it did nothing to help her lack of luster, just like it was hung on the bamboo pole to dry under the sun.

Standing behind her was a little maid that looked pretty and pleasant; she was secretly sizing up the two boys in curiosity, her eyes showed sympathy.

Kou Zhong cupped his fist to salute and said, "This is ..."

Without any trace of politeness the tall and thin woman cut him off, "You must be Fu Jing and Fu Ning. Looking at your smell-of-mother's-milk-not-yet-dried appearance, how much experience can you possibly have? Er Zhishi is an astute man, but sometimes he is muddleheaded, unexpectedly he got you, these two useless people to waste my precious time."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were broadminded people, they could not possibly lower themselves to her level; thereupon they kept silent and ignored her insults.

The more the woman cursed, the more her anger rose; she grumbled, "Just yesterday I sent people to Yiling to send gifts and invite the most famous Pastry Chef in the area to come and serve Changzhu, but now you, two kids who don't know the immensity of heaven and earth, came to mess things up. This is really irritating!"

The two boys suddenly understood, the reason this woman was so unfriendly

was because of rivalry. She wanted to be in charge of hiring and firing kitchen workers, but the people she hired failed to satisfy the Ranch Master's taste, hence she lost face big time.

This time, supposing the Second Manager Liu Zongdao succeeded in recommending these two boys, wouldn't she lost even more face? In view of this, Liu Zongdao was not as simple as he looked to be.

Three or four young male servants congregated at the corridor on the other side of the courtyard, busily gesticulating at the two boys, in a taking-joy-in-calamity-and-delight-in-disaster manner.

However, even under this vicious woman's lashing out without leaving them any room to maneuver, the two boys remained calm and composed, like even if they were being scolded for three days and three nights, they would not be impatient.

More and more people heard the commotion and came to watch, filling the corridors around the courtyard. A large group of children, who were playing in the vicinity, also rushed in, creating a very lively scene.

Xu Ziling noticed that one of the children, a little girl was staring at him curiously, seemingly unable to take her pair of big eyes off of him; he could not help smiling at her.

The woman angrily scolded him, "Are you listening to me?"

Bashfully the little girl hid behind her friend. Xu Ziling's tiger-eyes flashed with cold rays; he looked straight into the woman's eyes and unfazed, he said, "We are hired to make cakes and pastries, not to receive your insults. Besides, why speak so much nonsense? Won't testing our skill be enough? What's more, we don't even know who you are. If you think we are unsuitable, why not confront Liu Er Zhishi directly?"

With Xu Ziling's piercing gaze on her, the woman immediately felt as if she was burning in a scorching flame; her arrogance was gone instantly. Furthermore, considering the opposite party's response was reasonable, neither haughty nor

humble, momentarily she was stumped.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "We still don't know how to address Auntie."

The vicious woman finally regained her composure. Letting out a cold snort, she said, "I am in charge of the general affairs of the kitchen; everybody calls me Lan Gu [(paternal) auntie Orchid]. Hey! Come with me! I want to see what amazing skill you have." Finished speaking she stormed away.

Kou Zhong put on an act by bowing respectfully with clasped hands in four directions, just like a performer expressing his gratitude to the audience, which immediately prompted a roar of laughter.

Lan Gu did not look back, but her originally-lacking-color face became even more pale from anger.

The two-storied building they called kitchen was actually made up of twelve kitchen units. Working in this place were the chefs and their subordinates, amounting to more than sixty people: chefs, assistants, apprentices, and kitchen helpers; each position was clearly identified, and everything was under Lan Gu's supervision.

One unit, called the Upper Kitchen, specialized in supplying meals for the Ranch Master, Housekeeper, and other important personnel of the Ranch, and was further divided into four stations: east, south, west and north. The south station was Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's pastry section.

Still fuming, Lan Gu took the two boys to this place, and then with a wooden face said, "Before the day you are officially hired, you must not roam around anywhere. Otherwise, if you offend the Ranch's rules, even Er Zhishi won't be able to protect you."

Noticing that in their station, other than the steamer basket to make pastries, knives and cutting board, stove and other kitchen tools, the table was as empty as anything, Kou Zhong asked, "Where can we get the ingredients?"

Struggling hard to keep her temper under control, Lan Gu ordered the pretty maid standing to her left, “Xiao Juan! See if they need anything, and then let Uncle Gu know. Understand?”

With her head hung low, Xiao Juan acknowledged the order, but she could not help stealing a glance toward the two boys, while a delighted expression appeared on the corners of her mouth.

“I want to see what kind of trick you are going to play,” Lan Gu muttered to herself. Finished speaking, she left without looking back.

The three people looked at each other. “Pfft!” Xiao Juan suddenly burst into tender laughter and said, “I am waiting for two Big Masters’ instruction!”

Kou Zhong sat on the edge of the stove. After scrutinizing Xiao Juan for quite a while, he smiled and said, “Xiao Juan Jie [elder sister] is really pretty.”

Xiao Juan’s jade cheeks immediately turned as red as sunset clouds; half delighted half angered, she cast him a hateful look and said, “If only I had known earlier that this person can’t be serious.”

Folding his arms in front of his chest, Xu Ziling went to the door, looked out all around, and said with a wry smile, “We’d better get out of here as soon as possible! How could Lan Gu be willing to give us highest quality ingredients? This is called ‘even the cleverest housewife cannot cook without rice’.”

With a serious expression Xiao Juan said, “Two Xiao Shifu need not be worry! You have the support of Er Zhishi behind your back, no matter what Lan Gu won’t dare to play tricks in this regard, not to mention she basically does not believe that you can make any cake that will satisfy Changzhu’s taste.”

“Does Xiao Juan Jie believe?” Kou Zhong asked slyly.

Hanging her head down, Xiao Juan chuckled lightly, and then shook her head slightly. But then she looked up with a puzzled expression on her face, “You don’t seem to be nervous at all,” she commented, “Could it be that you really

have full confidence?”

Kou Zhong breathed out a sigh and said, “Speaking about taste, everybody is different. Even if you get the Chief of Imperial Kitchen who previously served that muddleheaded ruler to come over here, your honorable Changzhu might still be dissatisfied.”

Xiao Juan turned her gaze toward Xu Ziling, who was still leaning against the door, looking out. “Xiao Shifu, what are you looking at?” she wondered.

Xu Ziling was focusing his power onto his ears, trying to eavesdrop the conversation in the other stations. Hearing the question, he replied indifferently, “Nothing. I am just looking around. As long as you are willing to look attentively, you’ll be able to see a lot of things.”

Xiao Juan seemed to understand, but she did not really understand. Nodding her head, she sat down on a chair at the side. Knitting her jet-black eyebrows, she said, “I am still waiting for two Xiao Shifu’s instruction. Hmm! But you really don’t look like Pastry Chefs; you look more like chivalrous heroes and warriors.”

Turning toward Kou Zhong, she said, “The saber behind your back is not just for decoration, is it? Why not get good knives that are more decent?”

Kou Zhong changed the subject, “Isn’t Xiao Juan Jie Lan Gu’s trusted aide? Why do you seem to be very willing to help us out?”

Pouting her pretty mouth, Xiao Juan replied with a little disdain in her voice, “Who’s her trusted aide? I am Fu Dajie’s [big sister] subordinate. Were it not for Fu Dajie sending me to tell Lan Gu to have you make pastries, she could have been leaving you forgotten, or perhaps even forcing you to leave.”

“Who’s Fu Dajie?” Kou Zhong wondered.

Xiao Juan proudly said, “She is Miss’ must trusted person, the head of the maids of our Changzhu’s mansion.”

And then, lowering her voice, she added, “And she is in good terms with your good friend, that Luo Fang bro. I don’t need to tell you why she is willing to keep an eye on you, do I?”

Kou Zhong suddenly understood what was going on.

Xu Ziling cheerfully said, “We need three catties of dragon eye flour, a bottle of cow’s curdled milk broth, ten strips of white lotus roots, eight taels of fresh lotus seeds ...” He listed a string of ingredients in one breath.

Xiao Juan took note of everything, cast a sweet smile toward the two boys, and happily left.

Stupefied, Kou Zhong asked, “Aren’t those the ingredients for cool-breeze rice, dumpling oil rice, and jade-well rice?”

Xu Ziling calmly sat down and said, “Exhaustion drives changes, changes drives breakthrough. Just now I overheard that not only Shang Xiu Xun is a glutton, she also loves to try novel things. So we’ll make cakes that even we have not tasted yet. After she has tasted it, she’ll definitely have a second thought. Zhong Shifu, do you understand?”

Book 9 Chapter 6 – Beauty As Fair As Jade

Sweet aroma from the pastry kitchen permeated the whole place.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at the new strange-looking cake they pan-fried with butter, both were radiant with delight. But when the former scooped up some, the cake, which aroma was so tempting, torn apart immediately. The two boys wanted to cry, but they had no tears.

They have worked hard all afternoon, but until the sun set over the western hills, they still did not have any cakes.

The most annoying thing was that Liang Qian, Big Sister Fu and Lan Gu repeatedly sent their people to urge them, adding urgency to this matter.

The good ol' cake seemed to give them more headaches than Wanwan.

Kou Zhong said, "We might as well make these cake ingredients as stuffing, wrap it in dough mixed with bean flour. After flattening it, we'll use peeled sesame seed to pick it up and evenly deep fry its egg in the wok; I guarantee it will be sweet smelling, crispy and tasty."

Xu Ziling crossly said, "What's the difference from 'molded flaky pastry' then? We'd better use the steamer basket; after heating the spices, it will also emit sweet aroma without compromising its natural flavor."

This moment Lan Gu entered the kitchen. Feigning surprise look, she said, "What's that in the ladle? Are you going to make deep-fried cake, or thin porridge?"

Kou Zhong struggled hard to restrain the fire in his belly; he glowered at Lan Gu, making the latter immediately felt chill all over her body, so that she was trembling uncontrollably. Like a defeated hen she went out obediently.

Regaining his composure, Kou Zhong said, “Perhaps we should separately try pan fry, deep fry, roast, and steam, four different methods, making four different cakes. As long as there is one that that poniang [woman (derog.), b1tch; see Book 1] think it’s tasty, won’t we be able to redeem our face? Once I think about Lan Gu, that b1tch, I feel like we should not lose this battle.”

Xu Ziling agreed, “Let me make some deep-fried pancake with fresh savory taro flavor. You think about the other three flavors.”

This moment Xiao Juan came; the two boys hurriedly pleaded with her to get more ingredients.

By the time the two boys sat down, both mentally and physically exhausted, four different new cakes emerged.

Xiao Juan clapped and cheers. Picking the tray up, she said, “I’ll take this to Fu Dajie. Mmm! Smells really good! Just by looking at them I know they sweet, crispy and tasty.”

The two boys sprang up at once. One on her left, the other on her right, they walked out with her.

Stunned, Xiao Juan halted her steps, “What are you doing?”

Kou Zhong laughed and said, “Such a precious thing, how can we not escort it personally? If someone should add any strange material to it along the way, won’t we be finished?”

Xiao Juan laughed tenderly and said, “It is well covered; how could anybody play a trick? Who would have such guts? But if you want to roam around, just come with nujia [I, your servant] then.”

A shadow flashed, Liang Qian barred their way, and said crossly, "I have not tasted it, where are you taking it?"

Sticking out her silky breasts, Xiao Juan said, "This is Fu Dajie's order; as soon as it is done, I must bring it to Changzhu while it is still warm. It's none of your business."

Obviously Liang Qian was rather afraid of Big Sister Fu; as soon he heard that, he was stunned and could only stare blankly.

Lan Gu's voice was heard from the side, "You two forgot the rules? Who gave you permission to roam around randomly?"

Xu Ziling replied indifferently, "We are people who abide by the rules, right now we have Xiao Juan Jie leading the way, how can it be regarded as roaming around randomly?"

The three people boldly marched forward, leaving the angry-until-their-faces-were-devoid-of-any-color Liang Qian and Lan Gu standing behind.

Ranch Master Shang Xiuxun's residence was called the Flying Horse Courtyard, located in the middle of the Inner Castle. It consisted of more than thirty buildings, surrounded by wind-and-fire wall all around, constructed of brick and wood.

The two boys followed Xiao Juan into the courtyard via the back door, passing through a nine-bend corridor attached to the buildings. As they walked along, their eyes feasted on garden sceneries, one seemed to be more beautiful from another. Far and near the buildings were of different heights, strewn at random among the wooded area, a picture of elegance and rustic blended in harmony.

The most unique aspect was that due to the manor's elevation, occasionally they were able to catch a glimpse of the beautiful pasture below the Flying Horse City extending endlessly into the distance. Under the dim light of the crescent moon, it looked even more serene and peaceful.

Along the way, they encountered numerous maids, servants and mansion guards; all were staring at them politely, but with Xiao Juan, a maid close to their Ranch Master, leading the way, plus the two boys were wearing pastry chef attire, everybody knew that they were the newcomers and thus nobody was giving them any trouble.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were not people who had not seen the world, but seeing the hall and the other main buildings construction, their style and raised beam type and the roof beam structure, with their fitting delicately carved eaves beam components and the gorgeously ever-changing trim of the corridors, which strengthened the sense of depth, the landscape garden lining it, has sparked the penetrating, serene feeling hidden deep within their hearts.

The three of them walked through gates and passed doors, sometimes one or two atriums and winding corridors, until finally Xiao Juan took them into a reception hall. Putting the cakes down on a round table, she said, “You sit here for a moment, I going to notify Fu Dajie.”

After Xiao Juan left, Xu Ziling sat down quietly, while Kou Zhong looked around everywhere. He looked at the western garden scenery outside the window on the other side of the room; he also looked at the structure of the buildings, as well as leaning out of the window to look at the adjacent room, which happened to be a study room.

The study room was furnished with mahogany furniture; there were Four Treasures of the Study on the table [i.e. brush, ink stick, paper and ink-stone]. Leaning against the wall was a shelf full of antique knickknacks. Under the illumination of a palace-style lantern, he could see a roll of rhyming couplet hanging on one side of the wall, on it were written ‘There is delight in the Five Confucian relationships [ruler-subject,

father-son, brother-brother, husband-wife, friend-friend]; apart from the Six Classics [Book of Songs, Book of History, Book of Rites, Book of Music, Book of Changes, and Spring and Autumn Annals], there is no other literary works’. But he did not see anybody.

Walking back to Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong sat down by his side and said, “Looks like not only this Changzhu is a poetic individual, she has some scholarly knowledge

as well. But there is also a tiny bit of 'lone flower admiring itself' feeling on her. I just hope she does not look like Zhai Jiao!"

Displeased, Xu Ziling said, "Being born ugly is not a sin. Zhai Jiao's fate is pitiful, it would be best if you don't joke about her."

Kou Zhong nodded to acknowledge the admonishment, "Yes!" he said, "I was wrong!"

Xu Ziling was emotionally moved. "This is perhaps one of your strengths," he said, "You are willing to admit mistake, and can learn something from it. Just like recently you love to talk about compassion, duty, propriety and integrity, just because I often accused you of being too exploitative; is that right?"

Embarrassed, Kou Zhong said, "You, this kid, are making fun of me."

Xu Ziling looked out the window, at the garden reflecting the moon and the lantern light; smiling, he said, "You are right. This Shang Xiuxun is definitely not an ordinary person. Just look at the layout of the rockery and amazing stones, and the ingenious arrangement of the wintersweet [*chimonanthus praecox*], the Japanese banana [*musa basjoo*], the wisteria, the osmanthus flowers; none did not appear as stereoscopic image standing right in front of the window, making people ponder endlessly. From this you could tell that she is brilliant."

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "And don't forget that she really knows how to eat."

And then he turned around and leaned over and said in a low voice, "If she is as beautiful as Shan Wanjing, would Xu Ye give her your consideration? Based on your moral standing, outward appearance and martial art skill, you should be a good catch. Hey!"

Smiling wryly, Xu Ziling said, "It would be best if I married both Shan Wanjing and Shang Xiuxun; that way, by the time you are striking the world, when you need weapons you'll get weapons, and when you need warhorses you'll get warhorses!"

Having his fox's tail revealed, Kou Zhong's big eyes lit up as he said, "Good idea! Aiyo!"

Xu Ziling withdrew the fist he struck Kou Zhong's thigh with and said, "You should know what's called vortex power by now, ha! How can I be as unethical as you are?"

Suddenly they heard barely audible sound of footsteps.

The two boys looked at each other, and both could see the surprised look on each other's face.

Turned out the sound of footsteps came from the Riders Building connected to this reception hall, which was less than a zhang away from the door. That is to say that the newcomer was within two zhang from them before they started to detect her presence.

Definitely it was not the sound of Xiao Juan's familiar footsteps. This adorable girl has come and gone their pastry kitchen no less than twenty times today; they could even replay it in their mind.

This person's qinggong was superior, definitely not below Fu Junyu's.

At this thought, the two boys' scalp went numb as they watch the door, thinking that it would be really terrible if Fu Junyu really showed up.

Then the two boys' eyes lit up.

A young woman, with multifarious bearings, whose jet-black and beautiful hair cascaded down like two streams of waterfall on her fragrant shoulders, which looked like they were carved by a knife, whose beauty was extraordinary, which probably was comparable to Wanwan's, who was dressed in tight warrior outfit, stepped into the room. She did not seem surprised at the two boys' presence.

Her simple and elegant outfit highlighted her outstanding face and her shiny sun-bronzed skin and tender and lovely flesh, which exuded a burning hot

youthfulness and enviable health.

Her pair of beautiful eyes was unfathomably deep, her thick eyelashes were adding more mystery to her phoenix eyes, which were rippling like the most fragrant and richest wine brewed by the immortals.

While Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were looking at her, dumbstruck, she gracefully walked over to the best seat across from the two boys and sat down. Stretching out her slender lily-white hand under her gauze dress, she opened the lid of the tray, took a quick look of what's inside, wrinkled her pretty, straight, and small nose, and said, "The aroma is ordinary, but the outward appearance is very unique, because I have never seen an ugly delicatessen like this."

Greatly surprised, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other, and then they scrambled to stand up and salute her. "Changzhu!" they exclaimed, "Please forgive our disrespect!"

Without even looking at them, Shang Xiuxun put the lid on the side, and grabbed one of the cakes, put it in front of her fragrant plump and glossy lips, and then with her neat and snow white small teeth, which color complement her skin color well, she gingerly took a bit on the corner, and carefully sampled the cake.

The two boys nervously looked at her cheeks, which movements were barely perceptible. However, even after the movements ceased completely, this peerless beauty outside of Wanwan still did not speak, and still did not react to either their stare or their salute.

Since she did not speak, the two boys did not dare to ask.

It was not that they did not have the courage; rather, deep down they were afraid to know the answer, especially recalling Lan Gu's loathsome look.

In this life-and-death-decisive-battle like moment, a smile, like a glimmer of the moon breaking through the dark clouds, escaped from her mouth; her pair of big eyes, which looked as if they affectionately contained her feeling, swept the two boys over. She nodded and said, "Can still be considered edible. Although not

top grade, the creativity is commendable, it surpasses those so-called famous chefs who are hidebound by convention. Sit down!”

The two boys cried out ‘close-call’ in their hearts; they gladly sat down across from her.

Shang Xiuxun sized them up and down, her definitely-not-simple sharp eyes made the two boys uncomfortable.

They struggled hard to curb their true qi, so that it would not leak out via their eyes and thus exposing their true identity.

Shang Xiuxun’s pair of jet-black eyebrows was suddenly knitted together, making her pretty forehead appeared like beautiful rippling waves of the ocean. Looking perplexed, she asked, “You don’t look like people who do this kind of thing for a living, am I right?”

Kou Zhong regained his composure, while in his heart he groaned, ‘This fairy is formidable!’ Nodding his head, he said, “Changzhu is formidable. Making cakes is indeed our side occupation, our main line of work is salt trading.”

“Pfft!” Shang Xiuxun covered her mouth as a tender laugh escaped her mouth.

It was quite some time later when she finally let her hand down. As if she had just seen Kou Zhong for the first time, she looked at him for a good while with graceful smile on her face before speaking softly, “You are forthcoming and witty; you amused me that I am also going to be frank with you. Just by looking at this cake, I am going to give you half a tael of gold per month per person; is there any problem? It should be more or less the same as profiting from salt trading, isn’t that right?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were greatly surprised. They had never imagined that Shang Xiuxun would be this straightforward; even more surprising, they never expected that pastry chef income could be this lucrative. A strange feeling welled up in their heart.

Without waiting for their response, Shang Xiuxun went on, “These days I am going to have a lot of guests. Just like your cake, your outward appearance is not bad, but your eyes lack a bit of spirit. But I don’t mind that at all, I just want you to come out and greet the guests for me during the banquet, or perhaps I’ll have you explain how to make these strange cakes.”

Without much choice the two boys nodded their agreement.

After stretching her alluring limbs, Shang Xiuxun stood up.

The two boys hurriedly paid their respect and sent her off.

Shang Xiuxun casually said, “Every ranch has its own rules, violators will be severely punished, even Er Zhishi will be helpless to defend you. The Housekeeper will be responsible to explain this aspect to you clearly.”

Finished speaking, she left without even looking back.

The two boys looked at each other in dismay.

After making sure that she has really left, Kou Zhong heaved a sigh and said, “This beauty is both pretty and formidable. Do you think she has seen through us?”

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and replied, “This is extremely hard to say. But one thing I know: this poniang is capable of enticing any man to his death.”

Kou Zhong felt the same way. “She is blessed by the Heaven,” he commented, “Not only with exceptional countenance, but also with naturally touching gracefulness. As for wealth, power and martial art skill, not a single one is lacking. Hey! Are you interested?”

Xu Ziling irately said, “Your own heart is moved yet you still say such thing. Do you believe that I can beat you up?”

Kou Zhong sat down disappointedly; he said, "For the sake of Song Yuzhi, I have lost the eligibility to pursue the deer, to chase under her skirt. This is the high price one must pay for the sake of vying over the world!"

Familiar sound of footsteps was approaching, the elated Xiao Juan, like a burst of fragrant wind, stormed in. "Changzhu is willing to hire you!" she called out with her tender voice, "And now I am taking you to see the Housekeeper."

Xiao Juan took them to the Housekeeper Mansion, and signaled them to stop just in front of the main gate, while she herself stepped over the threshold and continued toward a chair at the inner end of the hall, where she said respectfully, "Da Guanjia [great housekeeper], the two Xiao Shifu are here."

The two boys took a furtive glance, and saw smoke filling the air; not only tobacco smoke spouting out of the pipe, but also spiraling fragrant smoke from the sandalwood stove on a small table at the corner of the room, blending into some kind of scent filling the room.

A tall and sturdy man with bald head was reclining on the couch, with two pretty and flirtatious women on each side, giving him massage.

This big housekeeper of the Flying Horse Ranch was swallowing clouds and blowing out fog from the long tobacco pipe in his hand in a laid-back manner. His head was supported by a pile of soft pillows, his eyes were on the beam overhead, and he spoke glibly, "So young yet have good skill; it is indeed rare."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling could only listen quietly; they both thought that this man's airs was above Shang Xiuxun's.

Looking from the side, this Housekeeper appeared to be around fifty, his nose straight, his upper lip arched slightly over his upturned lower lip, giving him some kind of charm, showing his very strong personality and self-confidence.

A bit like he was talking to himself, Shang Zhen continued, "Entering our Ranch, you must observe our Ranch's rules. Offender to the rules is subject to severe punishment. Do you understand?"

The two boys promptly acknowledged.

Shang Zhen turned his head to cast them a quick glance before his gaze returned to the roof. Letting out a dry cough, he said, "We rarely employ outsiders, but this is a special case, plus you have a manager-level recommendation, so I have nothing to say."

After a short pause, his eyes gleamed with cold flashes as he turned his head toward the two boys again and said, "Although what you are wearing now bears Flying Horse insignia, you are still considered outsiders. Unless within three years you go the distance in compliance to our rules, receive a manager-level recommendation, and receive Changzhu's approval, you can't be considered Ranch people. Understand?"

Just by looking at his fierce and sharp gaze, one would know that his internal strength had reached a first-class master level. No wonder the Flying Horse Ranch was able to stay aloof from the dispute of the outside world.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling could only nod their heads in agreement.

Shang Zhen's gaze returned to the ceiling. Suddenly he sucked in a mouthful of smoke, and then slowly blew it out, "Outsiders also have outsider's rules to follow. First of all, you must never engage in an illicit sexual relationship with any Ranch women. You want women? Take a leave and go to neighboring cities and towns to solve your problem. Otherwise I will castrate you."

Xiao Juan, who was standing across the threshold from them, lowered her head; even she was blushing to the roots of her ears. The two boys' embarrassment need not be mentioned.

As if nothing happened, Shang Zhen calmly continued, "Unless receiving special approval, usually you are not allowed to leave the Inner Castle. As for other rules, Liang Qian will explain to you in details. You are dismissed!"

By the time they finished with Liang Qian and returned to their living quarters, it was already the first watch of the night [between 7-9pm]. It was only then did Xiao Juan happily bid her farewell from the two boys and returned to the Ranch

Master mansion.

After sniffing at himself and then sniffing at Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong proposed, “We are covered in greasy smell, and then we’ll have to crowd into one bed; how could we sleep? We might as well go to the bath house and enjoy a good his mother’s cold water bath. I wonder if there is any house law prohibiting us from sleeping this his granny’s late at night.”

Frowning, Xu Ziling said, “But where is the bath house? Right now everybody is hiding under his quilt looking for a dream; we won’t find anybody to ask for directions.”

“Just now I still saw some rooms with lantern lights in them,” Kou Zhong said, “Besides, bath house can’t be several li away from here, we can always look around while trying to find somebody to ask. Hey! We can always use some warm-up exercise before looking for the ‘Duke Yang Treasure’. This one will do!”

Xu Ziling finally agreed. The two boys picked up two sets of clean uniforms, and groped their way around out of their room.

The huge courtyard was quiet with no one in sight. Apart from their room, the other rooms were dark without any lantern or light, some even transmitted sounds of people snoring. Fortunately the main gate had a lantern hanging above it to provide illumination.

The sky was full of stars, but the moon was not showing its face. From the direction of the pasture came the sound of sheep bleating and horses whinnying, interspersed with the dogs barking, creating a unique atmosphere of a mountain town.

Kou Zhong unleashed his natural gift of geography, “To the left is Changzhu’s mansion, the Flying Horse Courtyard, to the rear is the kitchen building, to the right is the rear mountain, only the direction of our exit that I don’t know where it leads to. If we want to try, we should try this direction.”

Xu Ziling pricked up his ears and listened carefully, he said, “But the sound of running water actually comes from the rear mountain, perhaps there is a

seasonal spring in there somewhere. Only we will have to blindly grope and bump our way to it. If we break many taboos of this place, taking sticks or whips is totally not worth it.”

Kou Zhong agreed, “You are better than me in being a servant; I have never thought about sticks or whips. Ha ...”

While talking and cursing at each other in low voice, the two boys walked quietly on tiptoe toward the exit leading to the rear mountain.

Only after entering a moon gate that they found another garden behind the courtyard. The most amazing thing was that there was a corridor that wind back to the outside, that extended into the garden, opening up the depth of field, bringing about beautiful scenery as one walked along the corridor toward the garden. There was a lily pond on the left, with a small hexagonal pavilion built in the middle, and a small bridge connecting it to the bank.

The moon appeared on the horizon to their right, bathing the serene rear courtyard in its silvery light; the scenery was extremely moving. The two boys forgot about bathing, they stood still, full of praise.

Kou Zhong looked up toward the sharply bent cliff behind the courtyard, where on a crack in the rock an old tree defiantly grew with its branches dancing lightly in the wind. He could not help sighing and said, “Since our debut, this is the first time I am having the intention to shun the world and retreat to secluded place; a clear indication of how strong the influence of this place to me.”

Xu Ziling deeply shared his sentiments; he said, “Whoever built this landscape garden in the Inner Castle must be a master builder. Even Yang Guang’s imperial garden doesn’t have this kind of intoxicating effect.”

Kou Zhong nudged him and said with a laugh, “Do you see that gracefully winding clear creek? It must have come from a spring on the rear mountain. If we can find its source, we could take a quick bath and go back to the hexagonal pavilion to cool off and admire the moon; won’t that be fun?”

Xu Ziling was also in a good mood; he stepped forward as soon as Kou Zhong

finished.

With a tourist mind, the two boys turned to the left and wound to the right along the winding corridor, where more and more beautiful sceneries emerged on both sides. After passing a bamboo forest, they heard the crashing noise of water. Turned out at the end of the path was a square pavilion, overlooking a hundred-zhang high cliff, where a stream of waterfall flew down with irresistible momentum. Were it not for the bamboo forest separating the two places, the thundering sound of the waterfall could have been heard from the courtyard.

The two boys gasped in amazement.

To the left there was a gravel path leading toward the square pavilion, winding along the edge of the cliff, extending toward the depths of the forest, creating in their hearts the desire to explore this secluded area.

Following the path, the two boys turned to the left and wound to the right, until suddenly a wide panorama opened up before their eyes. There was a small two-story building strategically situated on the tableland overlooking the cliff.

This moment they could still see light coming from the second story, indicating that not only this building was inhabited, but also that the inhabitant had not gone to sleep yet.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling had never expected that there would be a place of charm and beauty at the end of the path. They were about to turn around and walk back when an old-sounding man's voice was heard from the upstairs, "Noble guests have already arrived, why not come up and meet Laofu face-to-face?"

Book 9 Chapter 7 – Strange Encounter At The Back Of The Mountain

An elegant room does not need to be big, fragrance does not require a lot of flowers.

As the two boys stepped over the main gate, where a sign board carved with the characters ‘An Le Wo’ [Comfort Zone; lit. still/calm happy nest] was hanging over it, a feeling of serene, peaceful harmony welled up in their hearts.

Opposite the entrance, on the beam supported by two pillars, there was another wooden board with this couplet written on it: ‘Mornings are suitable to make qin [zither] music, evenings are suitable to strike the se [standing harp with 5-25 strings]; old friends have arrived, new rains are starting to fall’. The calligraphic style was elegant yet simple, bold and powerful.

This hall was shaped in a four-sided living room style, with all four sides have ‘wooden pot’-style windows. On the far end the plant in the pot drooped down, covering the view of the dangerous precipice beyond. The gentle sound of the bamboo grove dancing in the wind faintly penetrating the inner hall, adding a more relaxed, natural feeling to the simple, plain, rustic mahogany furnishing of the room. On the corner, there was a cedar wood stairs leading to the upper floor.

The old-sounding voice came again, “Gentlemen, please come upstairs!”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling exchanged a glance, then walked slowly up the flight of stairs.

The room upstairs was divided into two sections by a standing screen. The front section had a round table and several chairs; presumably the rear section was where the host slept.

This moment a man was standing at the window, facing out. He spoke in soft voice, "Two Xiao Xiongdi, please sit down, try the Six-fruit Brew Laofu personally made."

It was only then did the two boys notice the wine bottle and wine cups on the table. The aroma of the wine permeated the whole place.

Under the illumination of two palace-style lanterns hanging from the beam, they saw that other than the table and chairs, there was only a few necessary furniture, all made of rosewood, displaying its stylish, quaint grandeur.

The old man dressed in formal intellectual attire. Although because his back was facing the two boys that they were unable to see his face, he looked slightly taller than Xu Ziling. Furthermore, because of the oversized long robe he was wearing, he exuded some kind of loftiness that commanded other people to look up in respect.

Recalling their own low rank, the two boys looked at the wine on the table, but were unsure of what to do.

The old man sighed and said, "Drink! There's wine to enjoy, life is short!"

His voice carried a profound helplessness, giving the impression that he must have a sad past.

Kou Zhong pushed Xu Ziling and sat down first.

They were both moving very cautiously, not willing to make any noise to disturb the sacred quietness of the small room upstairs.

They could still hear the faint sound of waterfall from the distance.

Kou Zhong lifted up the wine bottle and poured three cups. Seeing the old man has not made any movement, he picked one cup, and handed the other one to Xu Ziling.

The fruit brew entered his throat. The aroma was mellow and rich, soft and fresh. The most amazing thing was that the fragrance was thick, but in congruence, so that the aftertaste lingered long.

Tranquil and calm, the old man said, "This wine is brewed from a collection of pomegranate, grape, tangerine, crabapple, green plum, and pineapple, six types of fresh fruits. The manufacturing method involves picking the fruits, washing in water, bleaching in water, crushing, pits removal, soaking, juice extraction, fermentation, blending, filtering, and aging process, before loading it in barrels and burying it for three whole years. And it tastes good!"

Kou Zhong praised wholeheartedly, "Laozhang [Sir/gentleman] is adept in wine brewing, and is very creative."

The old man was silent for half a day before speaking softly, "Laofu has lived here for nearly thirty years. Other than Xiuxun, nobody ever dared to barge in here. You must be newcomers."

Hearing that, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling knew that they had violated a taboo; the latter apologetically said, "Liang Fu Guanxia [deputy housekeeper] has never mentioned this place to us, and thus we have disturbed Qianbei's [senior/older generation] peace. I ..."

The old man interrupted him, "You have Yangzhou accent; this is strange, since the Ranch very seldom hires outsiders. What do you do?"

Thereupon Xu Ziling narrated their story again.

Up to this point the two boys were still unclear of the old man's identity, or his relationship with the Ranch, but they were quite sure that he was an unfathomable senior martial art expert.

Kou Zhong could not help asking, "Has Qianbei really never left this place in thirty years?"

The old man laughed aloud, "Of course not," he said, "Although these past thirty years I have lived peacefully in this 'An Le Wo', but I spent quite a bit of time outside, more than the time I spent in this place. This time I came across you, it can be said it is predestined affinity; it's not easy for us to be here."

Finished speaking he slowly turned around to face the two boys.

It was a very particular face; plain, simple, inelegant, amazingly old. His long, thick black eyebrows extended almost to the edge of his temples, while the other ends nearly met above the bridge of his nose, in stark contrast with his deep, elegant hawk eyes. There were wrinkles at the corners of his mouth and under his eyes, making him appear to have a rather cold, tired and sad look of the affairs of life.

The bridge of his nose was straight and powerful, just like his waist. With the addition of his lips, which displayed natural air of arrogance, his slender and clean face, he ought to be someone who enjoyed the riches and honor, the glory and splendor of the world to the fullest; yet now he looked more like a dejected nobleman whose heart had died.

His gaze slowly swept the two boys. Smiling slightly, he said, "Do you know why as someone who take no notice of the things of the world I asked you to come up here?"

The two boys shook their head with blank expression on their face.

Revealing an exhausted look, both physically and mentally, the old man sat down slowly, took the six-fruit brew cup and drained it in one gulp, and said with a wry smile, "Were it not for this thing suspending my life, there's a good chance I would not see gentlemen today."

Hearing that, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other in dismay. "Is Qianbei injured?" the latter asked.

The old man nodded, "The injury I received thirty years ago," he said, "Although that witch's demonic power was lauded as the crown jewel of the heretical schools, it still failed to take my life; by taking advantage of the mountain's topography and utilizing my knowledge of geography, I managed to escape a thousand li and finally hid in this place."

He sighed and went on, "In thirty years, with my heart and soul I built the landscape garden. Were it not for this sustenance, I am afraid I have already succumbed to my injury and died. But these days I occasionally remember the old enmity, thereupon my injury flared out. I am afraid the old man's days are numbered."

Breathing out a mouthful of cold air, Kou Zhong asked, "Who was that witch?"

The old man stared hard at him for half a day; he also cast a glance toward Xu Ziling. Instead of answering the question, he said, "Actually, I have seen you a while back; I even eavesdropped your conversation. You two are very interesting kids indeed."

The two boys were stunned. "Where did Qianbei see us?" Xu Ziling asked.

The old man spoke indifferently, "Do you remember that abandoned village? The one where Zhai Rang fell into a sinister plot, so much so that his full works fell apart."

The two boys remembered the smoke from kitchen chimneys; their countenance changed instantly. "It was you!" they said.

Although the old man has exposed their true identity, his demeanor was still as amiable as before. He smiled and said, "That was the reason I invited you to come up; just by looking at your ability to suppress your divine qi, so much so that you can conceal it from Xiuxun, I know that your skill has advanced tremendously. Kou Xiao Xiong and Xu Xiao Xiong, can you tell me what enmity has brought you here to be pastry chefs?"

The two boys were greatly embarrassed; however, seeing his friendly manner, they did not conceal anything, and told him about how they acted before

thinking. Naturally they did not tell him about Kou Zhong's intention to utilize the Ranch in his effort to vie over the world; they only told him about trying to evade the enemy's tracking.

The old man did not reveal whether he believed their story or not; after pondering for half a day, he said, "Among the four managers of the Flying Horse Ranch, in terms of intelligence and martial art skill, Liu Zongdao ranks first. Logically speaking, under normal situation, he can't possibly meddle in the kitchen's personnel affairs. His high regard on you may be due to something else; perhaps your outward appearance and your aptitudes!"

Xu Ziling respectfully asked, "Qianbei must be a greatly well-known character of the Jianghu; would it be possible for you to reveal it to us?"

A glimmer of proud smile appeared on the corners of the old man's mouth; he replied nonchalantly, "Even if Ning Daoqi sees me, he would respectfully greet me 'Lu Laoshi [teacher]'. Ay! What does it mean anyway? Ultimately I still nurse a grievance under that witch' hands, and the illustrious name I built my entire life hereby lost forever."

Xu Ziling and Kou Zhong racked their brains trying to remember a Jianghu senior character with the surname Lu.

Feeling it would be embarrassing to ask directly, Kou Zhong tried a roundabout way, "Who was that witch anyway?"

The old man straightened up his back, his eyebrows rose, his sharp eyes shone with murderous aura as he said hatefully, "Have you heard about Yin Gui Pai?"

The two boys blurted out in chorus, "Empress Yin, Zhu Yuyan!"

It was the old man's turn to be stunned. "You are indeed not simpletons! Unexpectedly you knew about this witch. Ay! There are two things that I regret doing in all my life, and one of them is to fall in love with this woman. To think that I, Lu Miaozi [his given name's literal translation is 'clever kid'] has always been conceited all my life, unexpectedly I made continuous mistakes; other than blaming it to my luck, what else can I say?"

The two boys felt the name 'Lu Miaozi' sound very familiar, but it took them quite a while to remember that it was Shen Luoyan who mentioned his name, saying that he was the number one skilled craftsman under the heavens. Supposedly her weird net was coming from his miraculous hands. No wonder the design of this Inner Castle's landscape garden, the layout of every tree, every stone, seemed as if it was made by Heaven, all because he was secretly behind it.

Glistening teardrops appeared from Lu Miaozi's eyes; unable to bear it anymore, he turned his head around and let out a painful sob.

Suddenly he shook his head and heaved a deep sigh, and then spoke in low voice, "You'd better go back and go to bed! If you are free tomorrow, try to find time to come here, I have something to tell you."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling slept for less than two sichen [i.e. 4 hrs] when the sound of knocking on their door woke them up.

From the outside, Xiao Juan called out, "Two Xiao Shifu, wake up quickly, it is dawn!"

The two boys were a hundred thousand times unwilling to get out of bed, but Xu Ziling was pushed by Kou Zhong to open the door.

As soon as Xiao Juan came in, her eyebrows rose up so high as she said, "What happened to you two? Such a dirty clothes and you went to bed in it? Take it out now and change, let me take the dirty ones to be washed, all right? Two 'great generals'?"

Rubbing his eyes, Kou Zhong fell back onto the bed and said, "Can I sleep a little longer, please?"

Putting her hands on her small waist, Xiao Juan angrily said, "Changzhu wants to see you, quickly take a bath and change your clothes."

Xu Ziling sat down on the corner of the bed and said with a wry smile, "Not

taking a bath is also violation of the house rule?”

Xiao Juan stomped her feet and said, “If you keep doing this, I won’t pay any attention to you anymore!”

Kou Zhong sprang up, pressed his hands on Xiao Juan’s shoulders, and smiled apologetically, “Xiao Juan Jie, please calm down; may I ask which way is to the public bath, north, south, east or west? Also how many li do we have to walk? The sooner we go, the sooner we will come back.”

Xiao Juan wanted to keep a straight face, but in the end, “Pfft!” she could not help laughing. Rolling her eyes, she frowned and said, “Don’t stand too close; you stink!”

Kou Zhong laughed aloud and stood back. Casually he caught the clothes Xu Ziling threw at him; he was adamant not to concede, “There are many kinds of stink, my kind is the best kind of stink.”

Xiao Juan laughed tenderly and went out the door. The two boys scrambled to follow on her left and right sides.

The weather was very nice that day, an old servant was sweeping dead leaves in the courtyard, everywhere they looked, they saw people were coming and going. Three young maids, who were pruning the flowers and bushes, were brazen enough to stare at them.

Kou Zhong whispered in Xiao Juan’s ear, “Why does Changzhu want to see us?”

Xiao Juan did not care at all, “How would I know?” she replied, “It was Fu Dajie who ordered me to get you.”

Kou Zhong fell back to Xu Ziling’s side, who was walking three steps behind; he laughed softly and said, “It ought to be because you are handsome enough, right? Ha!”

Xiao Juan suddenly stopped, turned around with arms akimbo, her apricot eyes glowered at them as she shouted with her tender voice, "What did you say? You must be talking bad things about Changzhu."

The two boys did not expect her reaction to be this intense; they jumped in fright.

Xu Ziling hastily said, "Xiao Juan Jie, please don't misunderstand, Xiao Ning only said that probably Changzhu did not think we did not learn enough lesson, so that she summons us to admonish us."

Xiao Juan half-believing, half-doubting; she spoke with serious expression, "Just remember: don't be disrespectful toward Changzhu, otherwise, no one will be able to bail you out."

Without any choice, the two boys nodded their promise.

Xiao Juan continued in low voice, "If you really dare to speak ill of Changzhu behind her back, I will no longer pay attention to you."

When Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling arrived at the 'Flying Horse Pavilion', where Shang Xiuxun handled day-to-day operation of the Flying Horse Ranch, this beautiful Ranch Master was having a meeting with the Housekeeper Shang Zhen and the Four Managers, including Liu Zongdao. About a dozen men and women were standing outside the courtyard, Deputy Housekeeper Liang Qian and Lan Gu were among them.

Noticing the two boys arrival with Xiao Juan, they all turned their attention to them. Lan Gu even whispered something to a man standing next to her, evidently she was talking about the two boys.

One of them, a young girl with well-proportioned figure, gentle, refined, and dignified, with elegant appearance, stepped forward to meet the three people. Frowning, she said, "Why so late? Changzhu has already asked about you, you don't know how embarrassed I am."

After explaining the reason, Xiao Juan introduced them, “This is Fu Dajie!”

The two boys hurriedly paid their respect, while secretly praised Luo Fang’s luck with women was indeed not shallow; they also did not expect her to be so young, yet her position within the Ranch was quite high.

Big Sister Fu studied the two boys for a moment; an amazed look flitted across her pretty eyes. She was just about to speak, when the man standing guard by the door called out, “Summoning the two Pastry Chefs!”

Big Sister Fu instructed them in low voice, “Come with me, be careful when speaking.”

The two boys could not help feeling a bit nervous as they came to just outside the threshold.

They saw that the entire furnishing inside the hall was finely carved furniture, in the middle was three-panel marble-deck big reclining chair, on east and west were symmetrically placed two marble armchairs with circular screen and a matching small table decorated with some small objects; the atmosphere looked solemn and serene.

Shang Xiuxun was half-reclining on the chair, she was dressed in men’s clothes, complete with a hat to cover her beautiful hair, yet it was still difficult to conceal beautiful glow of her oppressing natural beauty.

The Housekeeper Shang Zhen was sitting on the first chair to her left, and the next in line was precisely Liu Zongdao, while the other two [sic] managers were sitting on the other side.

The three people had to give way to an old man coming out of the pavilion. Big Sister Fu saluted to him and reported, “Two Xiao Shifu are here.” And then she whispered, “You are new here, you can’t cross the threshold.” After that she withdrew to the side.

The two boys had no choice but to stay outside the threshold and saluted

inside, feeling a bit awkward.

Shang Xiuxun had her head down, concentrating on drinking her tea. Shang Zhen was blowing smoke from his pipe. Liu Zongdao returned their salute with a smile, but the other three managers' eyes were like sharp arrows shooting at them.

Li Zongdao's single eye lit up as he smiled and said, "Was it because the hard journey that you were unable to get out of bed?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were quick-witted; they knew he was saying that in their defense, hence they promptly agreed with him.

Taking advantage while Shang Xiuxun was still drinking her tea, Liu Zongdao introduced the other three managers.

The First Manager Liang Zhi was a man short in stature, about forty years old, but grew a beautiful, glossy black beard. His eyes flickered with terrifying sharpness, the taiyang acupoints [on one's temples] bulged out. Just by looking at his appearance, one would immediately know that he was a martial art master expert in both inner and outer skills.

The Third Manager Tao Shusheng was a big and tall middle-aged man, his eyes long and narrow like a goat's, making his appearance unflattering.

On the contrary, the Fourth Manager Wu Zhaoru was young and handsome, his skin as fair as a girl's; but compared to Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling's unique physical appearance, he appeared exceptionally inelegant.

The three managers' response seemed to be rather cold; it appeared that they only nodded their heads to acknowledge the two boys' salute just as a courtesy to Liu Zongdao.

Shang Xiuxun put down the cup and picked up something that looked like an account book from the small table and looked down to browse it. Absent-mindedly she said, "Other than pastries, what else can you make?"

Everybody, including Big Sister Fu and Liu Zongdao, was taken aback; nobody ever thought that their astute Ranch Master would summon the two boys just to ask such a trivial matter.

With his hands hanging by his side, Kou Zhong respectfully replied, "We know a bit of everything."

The Third Manager Tao Shusheng scolded them harshly, "Genius! Changzhu is asking you, outside of pastries, what other expertise do you have. Do you understand the question?"

Wu Zhaoru seemed to be breathing through the same nostrils with Tao Shusheng; he laughed mockingly and said, "Perhaps they have expertise in a bit of everything!"

Xu Ziling did not take any offence, but Kou Zhong really wished he could take the two men outside and give them a good beating; but right now all he could do was 'glug!' swallow his anger into his belly.

Shang Xiuxun still had her attention focused on the book; she did not even seem to hear what others were talking about. It was quite a moment later she finally said slowly, "In the meeting tonight we will have honored guests coming from the north. Northerners love to eat roast meat, smoked meat and stuff like that the most. Do you know how to make them?"

Kou Zhong nodded and said, "Roast meat, smoked meat are no problem. Changzhu, please just instruct us which one to make."

"Smoked meat then," Shang Xiuxun replied without thinking.

Clearing his throat, the First Manager Liang Zhi said, "It's not that I don't trust you, but the guest' status is definitely not a small matter, plus he is from a dignitary family, and pay particular attention to food and drink. If your skill in this regard were slightly lacking, you would only display your meager skill before an expert. Therefore, is it possible for you to tell us first how you are going to make the smoked meat?"

Finally Shang Xiuxun raised her small head up; her pretty eyes were fixed on the two boys, "That's right!" she agreed, "Tell us then."

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling were well aware that Liang Zhi and the others suspected their identity; fortunately they did have 'genuine goods at fair prices' skill they learned from Ol' Zhang. The latter spoke nonchalantly, "The most critical thing in making smoked meat is to blend the flavor of the seasoning well, requiring boiling water over high heat, mixing Sichuan pepper, lilac, amomum, cardamom, ominated, garlic, fresh ginger, thick soybean paste, tofu, and sweet soy paste [please don't ask me, I have no idea what these seasoning are]. Only then will the finished product have both the bright color and the thick savory taste."

Kou Zhong joined in, "Next will be the smoking technique itself. First, mix the choice meat and the sauce well in a big pot, and then smoke it over cedar wood. The skin will be crispy and the meat tender, inside and outside will be cooked uniformly; the fat won't taste greasy in the mouth, the lean meat won't break our tooth, and the distinctive flavor will be unique."

The two boys were both eloquent and able to adapt to the situation well; echoing one another like that, they painted a very vivid picture as if a plate of hot, spicy delicacy with its aroma permeating the whole place was already served on the table.

Emotionally moved, the Housekeeper, Shang Zhen, removed the pipe from his mouth and said, "Indeed you have real ability and learning, definitely not con artists."

The two boys laughed in their hearts. "Thank you for Da Guanjia's praise," they spoke in unison.

Shang Xiuxun was noncommittal; she looked down on the book again and said absent-mindedly, "Tonight, other than in charge of the main dish, you also have to prepare some dessert. Dismissed!"

Returning to their room, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling did not know whether they

should laugh or cry; Shang Xiuxun grandly and seriously summoning them, unexpectedly it was only to discuss such a 'chicken feather, garlic skin' matter.

However, this matter has brought unintended aftermath; since Lan Gu could not figure out Shang Xiuxun's treatment toward them, immediately she became a lot friendlier than before. After inquiring about the ingredients, she immediately went to make arrangement for them.

Kou Zhong thought hard, "Who could come from the north and has illustrious family background?" he asked aloud.

Displeased, Xu Ziling said, "You'd better leave some brainpower to deal with the pastries and dishes for tonight! Although we know how to make smoked meat, but what we learned from the Ol' Zhang would not do the trick. If they had never eaten any smoked meat before, it is still all right, but if we want to gain those northern people's praise, it would be no more than a dream."

With much trepidation he said, "Just by remembering our creativity in producing the cakes yesterday, I already have a headache. You must think of something."

Smiling wryly, Kou Zhong said, "I am relying on you to think of something."

The two boys 'you look at me, I look at you', suddenly their eyes lit up at the same time.

Pointing at Xu Ziling, Kou Zhong said, "Are you thinking about him?"

Xu Ziling nodded and said, "He is the number one master craftsman in the world; plus he is experienced and knowledgeable, at least he is able to brew outstanding wine, cooking dishes and making pastries should not be too far below!"

The two boys sprang up immediately.

Xu Ziling pulled Kou Zhong back and said with a laugh, "You stay here to deal

with Lan Gu, I am going to ask him, the Senior's guidance, understand?"

Xu Ziling had just left; Lan Gu stepped across the door. Frowning, she asked, "Where is Xiao Jing?"

Kou Zhong simply rubbed his belly, and then pointed outward.

Lan Gu smiled knowingly and said, "Everything for the sauce is readily available, but you must select the meat yourselves. Do you need any help? Or perhaps another room in the kitchen?"

Kou Zhong immediately unleashed his delaying tactic; he said, "We, two brothers, have always advanced together, retreated together; we have business, then we have the capacity. I am going to wait until he finishes pooping before we set about our task together. Hee! If we need extra hands or extra room, we'll let you know!"

Lan Gu gave him a dirty look. She was about to lash at him, but then she changed her mind and pressed down her temper; so after mumbling something she left.

Soon afterwards two male servants came to deliver the seasoning. Kou Zhong immediately got busy.

A moment later Luo Fang came to find him. After chatting for a few moments, Kou Zhong asked him, "Do you know what kind of people are coming tonight?"

"I am not clear about that," Luo Fang replied, "All I know is that the guests are obviously people of great influence; otherwise Changzhu would not personally go out to meet their ship. From time to time these past few years, there have been people coming here trying to build friendly relations, but Changzhu has never attached any importance to them like she does this time."

Kou Zhong failed to grasp the main points; he blurted out, "Right now the whole country is in rebellion, and we have war-horse to sell, naturally people are trying to build friendly relationship with us!"

“That is true,” Luo Fang proudly said, “But there are some guys who acted recklessly, they came wanted to take control of us by force. It’s just that within hundreds of li around here, who are not our Ranch’s descendants and disciples? Any wind blowing swaying the grass, nothing escaped our attention.”

Following the tone of his voice, Kou Zhong said, “Which people have that much guts?”

A bit vexed, Luo Fang said, “Have you heard the people on the street mentioning the four popular piece of doggerel recently? They are the ‘Not even a blade of grass grows’ Xiang Batian, ‘Chicken and dogs won’t remain’ Fang Jianding, ‘scorched earth for a thousand li’ Mao Zao, ‘the Ghosts weep the Deities cry’ Cao Yinglong.”

Kou Zhong had a sudden revelation, “Ah, those must be the Xiang-Fang-Mao-Cao, the Four Big Bandits!”

Luo Fang hatefully said, “Precisely those four men, whom the deities detest and the ghosts loathe, who loot all over the place and in all directions, who leave trails of destruction everywhere like locusts, who rape and pillage, not stopping at anything.”

After a short pause, he went on, “We are as close as lips and teeth with Duba Village of Jingling, we support each other, and have several times killed their small bands of raiders, so that they view us as a nail in their eyes early on. But recently they secretly forged an alliance, in preparation to break off the rescue route between Jingling and us, and then they will go all-out to attack Duba Village. This scheme is certainly very malicious.”

Kou Zhong understood now. Although in themselves the Four Big Bandits’ power was insufficient to deal with war on two fronts, it was enough to separately lay heavy siege on Jingling or Flying Horse Ranch, then they would be able to nibble away the surrounding towns and villages, so that it would be difficult for the Duba Village and Flying Horse Ranch to maintain their existence. Even if they ultimately obtain victory, their strength would take heavy beating.

“How’s those thieves’ strength?” Kou Zhong asked.

Lou Fang replied, “Of the Four Big Bandits, in terms of martial art skill, the ‘Ghosts cry deities roar’ Cao Yinglong is the most superior, he also has the largest number of thieves under his command, up to 30,000 people, and they constantly recruit new people; constantly expanding on daily basis. Currently they are occupying Baodong County near the Great River, more than a hundred li to our west. Their prestige rose up greatly, the other three Bandits consider him as their leader.”

This moment Xu Ziling returned, his face flushed with excitement, “Let’s start immediately,” he said.

After greeting him, Luo Fang said, “Do your job well. Changzhu has never shown such high regards to anybody from the kitchen. Perhaps later on you and I can become brothers. All right, I’ll leave you alone!”

After Luo Fang left, Kou Zhong happily said, “You have good material?”

Xu Ziling sighed in praise, “Not only good material, this is basically the secret recipe of the unique school of the number one skilled craftsman in the world. For the time being we can learn two recipes, one is smoked fish, the other is Jinhua’s sweet and crispy. Come on! Processing takes time, while we don’t have much time. We can talk while working. Tonight, we, the Twin Chefs of the Central Plain, will show off our great skill, which will shake the four seats. Those who eat it will sincerely convinced and ready to concede. Won’t it beat martial art superiority?”

Kou Zhong’s ‘old pride’ swelled up; he laughed and said, “Why, of course! It would be best if after eating it, Shang Xiuxun would give her heart to you, Great Chef Xu; that would be even more blissful! Ha ...”

Seeing Kou Zhong would never change his character, Xu Ziling said irately, “Come on! This treasured dish is called ‘Saber Fish of Yangtze River’, Mr. Lu said that if we mix and stir it with eggs, sauce and flour, and make it into strips, and then smoke it until crisp, it will be so tasty that after eating it, even the blinds would want to open their eyes. Get out! Less talking about your dream of vying over the world.”

After all the ingredients were ready, the two boys were busy non-stop.

By dusk, the smoked fish and the sweet and crispy were ready.

It was only then did the two boys remember that not even half a grain of rice entered their tummy that day. Without any scruple they helped themselves to a piece of smoked fish each and ate it with total delight.

Kou Zhong chewed and spoke, "Such delicious food, I can't believe it came from our hands. We'd better do obeisance and take that old fellow as our master, see if he has other consummate skills we can learn from him."

This moment, Xiao Juan and Big Sister Fu decided to honor the kitchen with their presence. Seeing the two boys embezzled the food, the former's almond eyes grew big as she scolded them, "You two are really brazen; you have the cheek to eat the food meant to entertain the guest to your fill."

Kou Zhong laughed and said, "We are only checking the taste. Hey! This smoked fish still lack a little bit, let me add a bit more sauce and check it again."

Grabbing another piece of smoked fish, he made a show of basting it with more sauce, and then wolfed it down his stomach with total abandon.

The two women were at a loss on how to deal with him. Big Sister Fu said crossly, "Changzhu's order, although during the banquet you will serve nearby, you will also have to introduce Jiangnan delicacy to the guests. Do you understand?"

Xu Ziling did not like the crowd; even worse, he did not like to be other people's servants who were sent to do their bidding. Pretending to be exhausted, he said, "We have been busy all day long, our body weary, our strength exhausted early on; can we be excused from this one obligation?"

Xiao Juan laughed and said, "What one obligation or half obligation? Are you being drafted to fight a war? Changzhu has high regards on you, that's the

reason she is willing to let you increase your knowledge by getting involved in this occasion. Whatever Changzhu says is the golden rule; disobedience is punishable by beheading. Are you clear?”

Big Sister Fu smiled sweetly and said, “In the Ranch, nobody else is like you, who make things happen but love to act behind the scene. Quickly get those things and come with me, Changzhu wants to sample it first!”

Book 9 Chapter 8 – Meeting Face-To-Face On A Narrow Path

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stood respectfully by the table, unable to take their eyes off beautiful Ranch Master Shang Xiuxun, whose beauty shared the limelight with Wanwan, who, at this moment, was picking up a piece of smoked fish with her fingers, and sent it to her fragrant lips, using her unique school's eating technique, slightly revealing a perfect row of her snow white teeth, and took a small bite with a charm that was beyond human understanding. Her pretty eyebrows were slightly knitted as she slowly chewed the fish.

Big Sister Fu and Xiao Juan, who were standing on the other side of the table, were also nervous. They were afraid she would be dissatisfied and kick the two boys out of their Ranch.

Shang Xiuxun cast a sidelong glance toward the two boys. Suddenly, with a somewhat childish embarrassment she gobbled up the rest of the fish, and chewed happily. Her table manners and her expression were indescribably moving.

Pretending to be modest, Kou Zhong asked, "Is it acceptable?"

Shang Xiuxun rolled her pretty eyes, but was still unwilling to meet his eyes. "Well," she said, "Your level of achievement this time is better than those strange cake. Ah! No! It is simply incomparable. After this, I don't want you to become Pastry Chefs anymore!"

Xu Ziling respectfully said, "How about Changzhu try the sweet and crispy first before making decision?"

Shang Xiuxun cast him a quick glance, making Xu Ziling, a man with very high mental power also felt the unusual force from her pair of vast and deep, limpid-autumn-water eyes that hooked his soul and summoned his spirit. A bit reluctant to put down the smoked fish, she grabbed a piece of sweet and crispy, and quickly put it in her mouth.

Emotionally moved, she asked, “Did you really make these?”

Very pleased with himself, Kou Zhong said, “Hey! Yesterday we were still getting used to the kitchenware and the ingredients in this place, hence we somewhat failed to meet your standard. This time Changzhu is finally able to taste our real skill!”

Like having a full wind behind his sail, Xu Ziling caught on, “Culinary art is just like calligraphy or painting, only by having ideas one would be able to move the brush. We also have to immerse ourselves to study meticulously. If Changzhu can give us more free time to study, our products will be a lot better.”

Regaining her composure, Shang Xiuxun’s beautiful eyes flitted across the two boys. Slowly putting down the crispy cake, she leaned back into her chair and closed her eyes. “Do you know how to paint?” she asked.

Just now Xu Ziling was merely parroting Lu Miaozi, but at that time he did not teach him how to answer this kind of question; without any choice he simply said, “Xiao Ren [little/lowly one] does not know. It was our Shifu who told us when he taught us this skill.”

Shang Xiuxun opened her eyes, nodded and said, “Your Shifu must be an extraordinary person.”

And then she went on, “Looking your as-healthy-as-a-horse physique and your robust body, have you ever learned martial art?”

Xiao Juan hastily signaled them with her eyes, imploring the two boys to be careful in responding to this question.

Sticking out his chest, Kou Zhong said, "A dozen or so ordinary low-class thieves are not our match."

This was precisely Kou Zhong's brilliance. It should be noted that although the two boys were able to suppress the natural true qi within their body, and were able to diffuse the gleam in their eyes, but martial art masters are martial art masters; inevitably, there would be enough of spirited vigor showing through. At least due to their qi cultivation, their skin would glow, their muscles firm, which would be hard to conceal from anybody with discerning eyes.

Kou Zhong straightforwardly admitted that he knew martial art, and he did it with such exaggeration that others would be suspicious instead.

Shang Xiuxun spoke indifferently, "So you use a saber?"

Feigning amazement, Kou Zhong asked, "How did Changzhu know?"

Big Sister Fu was obviously Shang Xiuxun's pet; she interjected, "When your arrived, every body in the Ranch saw a rusty saber hanging on your back. Hee! Did you pick it up on the road?"

Grabbing his head, Kou Zhong said, "Dajie guessed correctly!"

Shang Xiuxun spoke tactfully, "Tomorrow morning, get the saber and show it to me."

Turning to Xu Ziling, she said, "How about you? What kind of martial art did you learn? Who taught you?"

Xu Ziling replied, "I trained punching and kicking skill; just like Xiao Ning, we have trained under more than a dozen different Shifu, none of them belonged to certain school or sect."

This moment the Housekeeper, Shang Zhen came in from the main hall to report, "The guests will be here shortly."

Shang Xiuxun stood up gracefully and said to Big Sister Fu, “Teach these two kids the Mansion’s rules, do not be lacking in manners toward outsiders.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling sat in a cloister built around a building behind the Ranch Master’s residence, enjoying the preferential treatment Big Sister Fu was giving them.

Sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, Kou Zhong stretched out and said, “Can you guess who’s coming?”

Xu Ziling was sitting on the lowest wooden step in the middle of the porch leading toward the courtyard, with his feet stepping on the grass. He was listening attentively to the voices intertwined with the sound of cups and plates in the main hall. Hearing the question, he said, “There are a lot of elites in the north, how can I guess which one is it?”

“Being a servant does not seem to be too bad,” Kou Zhong said, “But the worst thing is that we have no freedom; the Ranch is this much big and this much fun, but we are trapped in here.”

“You just want to learn how to raise horses, right?” Xu Ziling asked, “If you are not happy, we can leave anytime.”

“Don’t go yet,” Kou Zhong excitedly said, “If we go, we can’t walk the Heaven’s way.”

Stunned, Xu Ziling asked, “What do these two things have to do with each other?”

Lowering his voice, Kou Zhong told him about the Four Big Bandits forming an alliance.

Emotionally moved, Xu Ziling said, “We can’t just ignore this matter, but what can we do?”

Hearing that, Kou Zhong was greatly delighted, but he was interrupted by Xiao

Juan's footsteps.

Seeing the two boys disregarding the filth, like a dead snake or rotten trash sitting on the floor, the little girl angrily scolded them a moment. She said, "Crawl up quick! Changzhu wants you in the main hall to serve the guests, to explain how you made the smoked fish."

Upright and unafraid, Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling stepped into the main hall. From behind the carved-flower screen they peeked into the packed hall, where the banquet was taking place; immediately their countenance changed. With their heads hung low, they turned around to scurry back inside.

Seeing this, Big Sister Fu was startled; quickly spreading out her arms, she blocked the two boys' escape route and hissed, "What are you doing? Don't you know Changzhu and the guests are waiting for you?"

Kou Zhong smiled apologetically and spoke in the lowest voice he could muster, "Just now the two of us ate the wrong things, so now we need to go to the latrine to poo. Advancing together retreating together. Fu Dajie, please be kind and make things easy for us."

Big Sister Fu was angry, amused, and anxious, all at once. Stomping her feet, she said, "Don't act willfully and make a scene, whatever it is, you just have to bear it for a moment. Humph! Only ghost will believe your nonsense [orig. ghost talk]. Quickly get in! Otherwise, house rules await."

Xu Ziling also lost his heroic spirit; he pleaded for leniency, "Xiao Ning indeed talked nonsense [again, 'ghost talk']; the fact of the matter is that we are not accustomed to grand occasion like this, right now we are so nervous that we feel like going pooping. Would Fu Dajie please tell Changzhu, so that we would not make her lose face?"

Before Big Sister Fu had any chance to reprimand the two boys sternly, Shang Xiuxun's silver-bell-like voice already called from the inside, "Xiao Ning, Xiao Jing, what are you doing over there? Come here quickly to greet the noble guest. Princess Xiuning enjoys your smoked fish very much; she wants to compliment the Chefs!"

This time, even Kou Zhong regretted that from thousands and tens of thousands names in the world, why would he called himself Xiao Ning? But now it was too late. Just like riding a tiger and cannot get off, plus Big Sister Fu's push with all her strength, the two boys braced themselves to step away from behind the screen.

Under everybody's gaze, they felt like they were marching into the marketplace without a single thread of clothes on; totally embarrassing and unbearable.

"Ah!"

Li Xiuning's sweet and tender voice entered their ears; knowing that they had been recognized by her, the two boys did not have any courage to even raise their heads.

This evening, the Flying Horse Ranch's six most important people were all present, because the VIP guest was none other than the Tang King Li Yuan's daughter, Li Shimin's younger sister, and Kou Zhong's first love, Li Xiuning.

Even when facing a magnificent army with thousands of men and horses, Kou Zhong would not be this timid and desperate.

Shang Xiuxun, Shang Zhen, and Liang Zhi, the four Managers' attention was fixed on Kou and Xu, two boys. Suddenly hearing this tender exclamation, they could not help turning their gaze toward Li Xiuning in shock.

Accompanying Li Xiuning this time was Li Gang and Dou Wei, but neither one knew the two boys. Seeing Li Xiuning, who had always been sweet-tempered, gentle and quiet, unexpectedly cried out involuntarily because of two Pastry Chefs, they were also greatly puzzled.

Li Xiuning's astonished expression quickly faded; somewhat embarrassed, she said, "Please forgive Xiuning for failing to follow etiquette; it was simply because I have never expected that the two Shifu are so young."

This moment Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling already came to the banquet table; they stood facing Li Xiuning, with grim expression and hands hanging by their sides.

Li Xiuning recovered her usual calm, poised and elegant demeanor; turning toward Shang Xiuxun on her right, she smiled and said, "How do we address the two Shifu?"

Shang Zhen, who was sitting to her left, replied on Shang Xiuxun's behalf, "One is Fu Ning, the other Fu Jing; they are fellow brothers from the same village."

He did not point out which one was Fu Ning and which one was Fu Jing; apparently because he did not have any respect toward the two boys, and simply introducing them perfunctorily.

Li Xiuning repeated the names 'Fu Jing' and 'Fu Ning' twice in her heart. Her pretty face suddenly turned slightly red; apparently she had just gained a sudden comprehension. Fortunately the change was not too obvious, so that the other people were unaware of it.

Shang Xiuxun laughed and said, "Xiao Ning, Xiao Jing, Princess Xiuning and Li Gang, Dou Wei, two Daren are praising your smoked fish to high heaven; they even thought that it was without equal under the heavens. Why haven't you thanked them?"

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling forced a smile inwardly; without any choice they bowed down to express their thanks.

Li Gang was astute; seeing the two boys' outstanding appearance, which was rarely seen in the world, he knew that only Li Shimin could be compared to them. Thereupon he sounded them out, "Based on two Xiao Shifu's natural endowments and talents, no matter which business you picked, I am sure you will stand out among your peers. How did you select culinary art?"

Kou Zhong replied nonchalantly, "This is called 'the time dictates the fate'. If it were time of peace and prosperity, we, two brothers, might find a way to seek scholarly honor, to do something good for common people."

Astounded, Dou Wei said, “Xiao Shifu’s style of conversation is not uncouth, your words carry deep meaning, but was the tone desolate and cold? Was it because of some sad memories?”

Xu Ziling was afraid Kou Zhong might expose some mistake in his speech, plus he noticed that Shang Xiuxun’s beautiful eyes were fixed at them with thoughtful expression in them, thereupon he hurriedly replied, “Just before entering the Hall, we, two brothers were chatting idly, which led us talking about our hometown being ravaged in the fire of war; therefore, our mind was in turmoil. Dou Daren, please do not take offense.”

Li Gang nodded; addressing everybody sitting around the table, he said, “The whole country in rebellion, the first to bear the brunt has always been the common people. Take the private coin minting that is very popular nowadays; it brings the maximum destruction toward common people’s livelihood. Originally one thousand qian is worth two catties. But now in private coin minting, a thousand qian is less than one catty; so much so that iron disk, leather and paper are being used in place of copper coin. If this situation continues, I really don’t know what the end will be.”

Liu Zongdao joined in, “If only the Great Tang can unify the world, corrupt practices will be eliminated, the world will be in peace and security.”

Li Gang chuckled and said, “It will require Changzhu’s full support for this endeavor to succeed.”

Shang Xiuxun declined to comment. Rolling her beautiful eyes, she turned toward Li Xiuning, who was sitting quietly with a blank expression on her face, “Princess, aren’t you going to inquire how they made the smoked fish?”

As if she was just awakened from a dream, Li Xiuning said, “Xiuning is going to! Tomorrow I want to visit the kitchen to get a hands on lesson with two great Shifu; that would be the best approach.”

A jealous look flitted through the Fourth Manager Wu Zhaoru’s eyes; he proposed, “I’m sure Princess Ning is very busy. I could have them write the recipe in details; that would work as well.”

Li Xiuning cast a quick glance toward Kou Zhong, who had his head hung low, and insisted, "It would be better if Xiuning personally ask for two great Shifu's brilliant guidance!"

Shang Xiuxun laughed indifferently and said, "Just as Princess wishes!"

Turning toward the two boys, she said, "You are dismissed, go get some rest."

Returning to their room, Kou Zhong dejectedly slumped himself in the chair. He seemed to want to talk, but no words came out.

Xu Ziling sat down opposite him; he said indifferently, "As long as she is not married yet, you still have a chance to get her. Kou Zhong of today is totally different from Kou Zhong of yesterday; nobody will dare to despise you."

Kou Zhong sighed. After pondering for a moment, he slowly shook his head and said, "I already have no way to turn back. Let's not speak about she already has a sweetheart, even if she is willing to marry me, I won't abandon my aspiration of contending for hegemony of the world over wife or family. Ay! I know my own problem, you should also understand me, I, Kou Zhong, am absolutely not a person who will be easy content with my lot in life."

Xu Ziling had no more to say. He said, "I promised Mr. Lu to visit him tonight. Are you coming?"

Kou Zhong shook his head, "I just want to think by myself quietly."

After pondering for half a day, finally Xu Ziling rose up and left.

When Xu Ziling arrived at Lu Miaozi's little two-story house, this number one master craftsman in the world was standing proudly at the edge of the cliff outside his house. He appeared to be contemplating old affairs; there was a melancholy look on his face.

Xu Ziling came behind him, paid his respect and greeted him.

Lu Miaozi did not seem to care that Kou Zhong was not coming at all. He led Xu Ziling to the hall of the lower floor of his house, and after seated properly he said, “Although Jianghu people esteem me as the number one master craftsman in the world, they thought there’s nothing I don’t know, there’s nothing I cannot do; this is definitely a misunderstanding.”

Xu Ziling sincerely said, “Mister is definitely someone with most experience and knowledge this kid has ever encountered in my life. The smoked fish and sweet and crispy that we made according to Mister’s instruction were simply ...”

Lu Miaozi cut him off, “Regretfully that is precisely my weak point. I was interested in everything, anything can provoke my curiosity; with limited life I was pursuing infinite knowledge. Supposing I was able to focus on martial art, although I may not necessarily able to overcome that witch, at least I would be able to escape unscathed, and thus would be able to live eight or ten years longer.”

But then he smiled and said, “Then again, were it not for my extensive knowledge of medical science and therapeutic regimens, I would have been dead thirty years ago, and today I wouldn’t be able to meet with you, Ziling, to spend the night chatting and drinking.”

Xu Ziling deeply felt his conflicting emotions, but could not find any word to say.

Lu Miaozi said, “Since leaving my home town at the age of twelve, until I was fifty, not a single moment I spent not living a wandering life; only constant changes and continuous stimulation made me enjoy the beauty of life. It was not until the bitter defeat in Zhu Yuyan’s hands thirty years ago that I finally settled down. Although from time to time I still travel around, my mood is already substantially different. I became more interested in arts, and have spent considerable time and energy to delve into it, until I finally obtained an unexpected discovery.”

Xu Ziling’s interest was greatly piqued; he could not help commenting, “This discovery must be extremely important!”

Lu Miaozi revealed a knowing ‘even you, this kid who have neither greed nor ambition, are also tempted by it’ smile, but he did not respond directly. Instead, he changed the subject by saying, “These past thirty years the things that fascinate me and drive me to study meticulously are: landscape gardening, building construction, mechanism, weaponry, history, geography and botany, the seven subjects of knowledge.”

Xu Ziling sucked in a mouthful of cold air and said, “Any one of those subjects will take an average person a lifetime of effort to master, yet Mister is able to master all of them at the same time. Hey! It is really hard to believe.”

Smiling wryly, Lu Miaozi said, “This is called ‘a leopard can't change its spots’; however, if I wasn’t wearied because of the internal injury, I might have concentrated on the martial art and then gone to find that witch so that both of us would perish together.”

With a wistful look on his eyes, he heaved a deep sigh and said, “Actually, landscape and building architecture was not something Laofu loved dearly. It was because I lost a game of chess against Qingya that I was forced to fulfill my bet, and had to design the courtyards, orchards, buildings and pavilions in this place.”

After a sad sigh, he continued, “However, if I did not devote my heart and mind in this, there is a good chance that the remorse would attack my heart and my injury would flare out and Laofu would have died. Oh, Qingya! This debt of mine, when can I repay it to you?”

Noticing Xu Ziling’s puzzled look as he stared at him, Lu Miaozi explained, “Qingya was Xiuxun’s mother. Ay!”

Intuitively, Xu Ziling understood that there must be an unusual relationship between Lu Miaozi and Shang Xiuxun’s mother.

Lu Miaozi looked as if he suddenly aged several years. After another deep sigh, he went on, “After inflicting injury that time, Zhu Yuyan personally hunted Laofu down. Originally I wanted to go to Ning Daoqi to seek shelter; who would have thought that he was traveling abroad? I could only go to the Flying Horse Ranch

to hide. By employing all kinds of ‘deploying troops to mislead the enemy’ schemes, I managed to deceive the witch into thinking that I have also escaped abroad; otherwise, Laofu would have been killed by that witch early on.”

And then, with a serious expression he continued, “This witch’s heretical skill has reached the pinnacle of demonic school proficiency, it involves inscrutable supernatural beings method. Ning Daoqi has subsequently fought hand to hand with her three times, yet he still cannot do anything to her.”

Remembering Wanwan, Xu Ziling remained silent.

Lu Miaozi was deep in thought for half a day. Suddenly his palm, which appeared empty, powerless and floaty, slapped the surface of the table. Although it did not create any sound, an imprint of his palm, at least a cun deep, appeared on the hardwood tabletop. With pained voice he said, “Oh, Qingya! I really owe you so much. If I could go back in time, I would definitely not slip away secretly. All those man’s great undertakings are no more than fleeting smoke; how could it be compared to your glance filled with love?”

A burst of emotion welled up in Xu Ziling’s heart; remembering Kou Zhong, he wondered if someday, just like Lu Miaozi, Kou Zhong would also regret this chance encounter?

Kou Zhong rose up to his full height from the chair. Gnashing his teeth, he picked up the Moon in the Well, and then like a floating smoke he flew out the window, and disappeared into the dark courtyard.

Book 9 Chapter 9 – The Escaping One

Lu Miaozi said apathetically, “Before my death, can you come here to see me every night?”

Xu Ziling nodded and said, “As long as I am still here, I can accompany Mister every night to chat.”

Lu Miaozi said, “If it were Kou Zhong, he would have been very eager to learn all kinds of skill from me; you have neither greed nor ambition, and are at home wherever you are. Thirty years ago I would have chosen Kou Zhong instead of you; but today, you are my best choice.”

Knitting his brows, Xu Ziling said, “Compared to Mister, I am a complete layman; I am afraid it would be hard for me to learn anything in such a short period of time, or live up to Mister’s expectation.”

Lu Miaozi smiled slightly and said, “Success or failure, you and I need not worry about it; just consider it an idle chat. Were it not for coincidentally meeting you in this time, I would not have any interest to hand down the understanding I gained during the last thirty years to you.”

Xu Ziling mused, “Supposing Kou Zhong asked me what I learned from Mister, it would be difficult for me not to tell him honestly.”

Lu Miaozi was unable to help laughing; he said, “You are very forthcoming; but what I am going to teach you is the ‘natural way’; it will be useful only for someone with indifferent attitude toward life like you, Kou Zhong will not be interested. What’s the harm in telling him honestly?”

Xu Ziling breathed out a sigh of relief. "That's good," he said, "I thought Mister was going to teach me how to build all kinds of mechanism and gadgets."

Lu Miaozi laughed involuntarily again; he appeared to be considering the best way to unload everything in his mind to the young martial art expert with extraordinary natural ability in his presence.

Kou Zhong flew to the top of the bell tower on the Ranch Master's residence. He saw row after row of roof ridges extending continuously to the distance. There were lantern lights everywhere, and guards, maids and servants walking along the corridors connecting the buildings.

Using the technique he learned from Chen Laomou, he quickly determined which building ought to be the main building, and that building should be the guesthouse. With further investigation, he was sure he could find where Li Xiuning was staying tonight.

He could not refrain his heart from sighing.

She was scheduled to see and talk to him the next day, yet he still wanted to see her tonight; if it was not superfluous, then what was it?

But soon his mind was flooded with blazing fire of desire. He was about to fly toward his target, a cluster of courtyards, when in a distant building he saw a shadow flashed.

Greatly astounded, Kou Zhong temporarily pushed Li Xiuning's matter to the back of his mind and flew out to pursue.

Lu Miaozi slowly stood up and walked over to the window. Looking out at the steep rock wall of the opposite cliff, with his back toward Xu Ziling, he said in heavy voice, "Between the Heaven and the Earth, everything has its own law, as well as many superficial changes, but no departure from the original stand. The law has its own beginning, and also has its end."

Xu Ziling was astounded, “The law has its own beginning, this logic is quite simple and easy to understand, but it has its end? I remain puzzled after pondering over it a hundred times.”

Turning around, Lu Miaozi smiled and said, “Didn’t I just say that after spent considerable time and energy for thirty years, I finally obtained an unexpected discovery? This is precisely the answer to your question.”

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, “Mister keeps dangling a carrot in front of me; can’t you just speak out?”

Lu Miaozi cheerfully said, “I just want you to have a deeper impression, hence I intentionally used some tricks.”

After pondering silently for half a day, Lu Miaozi slowly said, “Great spread out is numbered fifty; forty is used, nine remains. These two sentences are from ‘The Book of Changes’ [Yi Jing], which has always regarded as a teaching method of divination, simply because divination uses fifty stalks, which evolved into several methods. Except for one, I don’t know how many heaven and earth principles are hanging on these two sentences.”

And then he asked, “Have you read ‘The Book of Changes’?”

Xu Ziling’s thick face turned reddish; he shook his head indicating that he had not.

Lu Miaozi sighed and said, “When our ancient predecessors said anything related to these methods, due to their beliefs that mysteries of heaven must not be revealed, they always ‘hid the head and showed the tail’. Due to the proceeding sentence, ‘dividing two will take the shape of two’, which is precisely a divinatory diagram method, people have taken wrong steps in life, not knowing the usage of the hidden principle, and the principle of the hidden usage in the preceding two sentences; it is indeed the deepest layer of meaning of the law.”

It was the very first time that Xu Ziling had any exposure to the ‘changing principles’. His interest greatly piqued, he said, “Those two sentences sound interesting. What Heaven and Earth’s secret they actually contain?”

Remaining tranquil and calm, Lu Miaozi said, “Fifty is the perfect number. When the number reaches fifty, all living things under the heavens are on their places; there is no movement. However, if one number is missing and becomes forty-nine, there will be a lot of empty positions open. The other forty-nine will thus be on the move, there will be thousands changes and ten thousands usage; there will be no limit.”

Xu Ziling slapped the table and shouted with praise, “This explanation is exquisite beyond compare.”

Lu Miaozi was astounded, “Do you really understand what I was saying?” he asked.

“What’s so difficult to understand?” Xu Ziling asked in consternation, “Just like fifty chairs will seat fifty people. If these people are not allowed to change position, or allowed to go somewhere else, naturally there won’t be any changes. But if there was one less person vacating one chair, it’s only natural that there would be a lot of changes.”

After staring blankly at him for quite a long time, Lu Miaozi sighed and said, “You, this kid, indeed have superior natural talent; probably there won’t be any second person in the present age with that thought. What you just understood is precisely the essence of the law. It is called the ‘escaping first’; what has escaped is precisely this ‘one’. All the things that those river diagrams and stream books are talking about are no more than nature [innate] and nurture Bagua [eight divinatory trigrams of the Book of Changes]. From nature and nurture, the heaven and the earth exchange position, the universe turns around, and thus the change begins.”

After a short pause, he continued proudly, “Any knowledge between the Heaven and the Earth, including martial art and life, in its highest realm is how to find back this escaping ‘one’. Only after this ‘one’ is found will everything begin to return to the perfect ‘before the Heaven and the Earth discerned it’ realm. This is the greatest discovery I made after thirty years of hard thinking.”

Xu Ziling’s body shook severely; his tiger-eyes shot an unprecedented level of flashes. In that instant, he grasped one kind of mystery within a mystery, relating

to the secret principle of the Heaven and the Earth.

Kou Zhong pushed his speed to its limit.

Inside his body, like flashes of lightning the vortex of cold energy traveled back and forth at an astonishing high speed within his meridians, enabling him to move nimbly with the same freedom of action of the fish swimming in the water; compared to before, the difference was like the Heaven and the Earth.

His feet landed on the back of a building's roof, and he swiftly slid down to the ground. Passing through a moon gate at the entrance of a side garden, he swiftly moved across toward the back of a thicket, barely missing an elderly maid's sight, who had just opened the window to look out. Somersaulting over the perimeter wall, he flitted diagonally to the top of a building nearby, and then ricocheted toward a horizontal branch protruding from a big tree next to the building. Borrowing the elastic energy of the branch he flew toward the top of another building, from where he just caught sight of the shadow was shooting up at an angle toward the top of the Inner Castle's external wall.

Kou Zhong jumped in fright; but then immediately realized that the opposite side must have used flying rope with hook or similar tools; otherwise, other than Ning Daoqi, Bi Xuan, or other martial art masters their caliber, who could leap straight onto the city wall over fifteen zhang high?

Who was this person?

Kou Zhong's toes pushed on the branch of an old Banyan tree by the wall; unleashing his qinggong and exerting his entire strength he flew to the top of the wall just like a fish leaping out of the water.

He was still about a zhang away from the top of the wall when he ran out of momentum. While Kou Zhong was groaning inwardly, suddenly he felt the vortex of cold energy within his body grew and multiplied without end, giving him a boost of power.

Greatly delighted, he raised a mouthful of true qi and lightly set his feet on the wall.

Due to its geographical advantage of inaccessible natural barrier, the Flying Horse Ranch's defense was concentrated on the outer wall; they guarded against the outsiders but not against the insiders. Therefore, the Inner Castle defense was not as tight. Anybody who was familiar with the situation and knew how to avoid several sparsely located sentry posts and lookout towers, plus in possession of first class shenfa, would be able to enter.

Kou Zhong was an expert in escaping and hiding. As soon as he reached the top of the wall, he lay prostrate while craning out his neck to look back and forth.

The mountain town's chain of buildings below the city wall extended all the way until the outside city wall.

Beyond that wall was the vast pasture, with tents everywhere and where the horses and the sheep whinnying and bleating.

After entering a small house with a courtyard, the dark shadow did not reappear. Kou Zhong sighed inwardly, knowing that he had to cancel his desire to meet Li Xiuning privately, a rare opportunity in thousands of years.

Leaping down the wall, he darted toward the building where the dark shadow disappeared.

Lu Miaozi's face was radiant with a divine light, as he spoke word by word, "This 'missing one' or 'escaping one' is circulating around the world continually, it roams around incessantly, while at the same time exists inside all living things. Laozi [Lao-tze] called it Dao [Tao, 'the way'], Sakyamuni called it Fu [Buddha/Buddhism]. The idea behind Fu is consciousness [Buddhist enlightenment]; thousands changes and ten thousands usage, there is no limit."

Xu Ziling slapped the table and said with a sigh, "This is indeed the most formidable xinfu [lit. heart law/method, I think I translated it as 'mental cultivation' before] in the martial art study; just like during the life and death battle, this 'escaping one' also circulating incessantly following the moves. If one can accurately grasp this concept, then one would be able to determine the

opponent's life and death."

This time it was Lu Miaozi's turn to be bewildered; frowning, he said, "I have never thought that this principle and martial art theory are related."

Xu Ziling explained matter-of-factly, "Within the duel itself, the qi is produced by the orifice, and the original spot of the qi creation is the life and death orifice. If this orifice was broken, even Ning Daoqi, Bi Xuan and their peers would undoubtedly die. Supposing during the time the true qi is circulating within the body this orifice is also constantly moving, it will be just like the 'escaping one', with constant change following the Heaven's enumeration. And thus the enemy would have no ability to grasp it or break it."

Stunned, Lu Miaozi stared at him for half a day. He sighed and said, "This xinfu of yours, not only it has never been recorded in any ancient books or martial art manuals, nobody has ever mentioned it either. Ay! I always boasted that my intelligent surpasses others, just because I had extremely vast knowledge. It was only because I failed to focus on martial art that my accomplishment could not reach Ning Daoqi and his peers' level. Who would have thought that only after seeing you today, I realize what exceptional talent in martial art study is really like?"

Xu Ziling said sheepishly, "I was just blathering; but this is really an interesting principle, I must study it carefully with Kou Zhong. I hope Mister would not mind?"

After staring blankly for quite a while, Lu Miaozi said, "Why would I mind? It seems to me that just now you have not fully expressed yourself; would you care to elaborate some more for me?"

Exerting himself, Xu Ziling said, "Just based on the qi orifice within one's body: during battle, there will always be the strongest and the weakest points, which are also moving incessantly following the style's changes. Being able to avoid the strong and strike the weak is the most formidable technique to control the enemy."

Frowning, Lu Miaozi said, "This method maybe effective in dealing with

ordinary martial art master, but Ning Daoqi, Zhu Yuyan, and the likes, I guarantee there won't be any weak point to be found."

Xu Ziling begged to differ; he said, "It's not that they don't have any weak point to exploit, it's just that the strong and the weak merge together, so that others cannot find it! Supposing we can be one step ahead in finding the next move's changes, by striking into an empty point, we can make them revealing the weakest point. Heavens! I finally understand the Yijian method. It's like anticipating the next piece; each move is forcing the opponent to have no choice but to respond, to have no choice but to expose their weak points."

Listening to that, Lu Miaozi was dumbstruck. It was quite half a day later that he regained his composure. First he revealed a bitterly self-deprecating expression, and then with a hoarse voice he said, "Now you can grasp the essence of this principle better than I do. I can teach you anything and you can use this profound theory to learn about landscape and building architecture, mechanism and various other subjects."

Kou Zhong flitted across the rear courtyard of the big building. Passing through a long corridor, he reached the courtyard connecting the front and the rear sections. Pulling himself up, he waited on the roof for a moment before leaping back down on the ground, and moved toward the shadow under the window on the west side of the building. Just as he was about to take a peek inside, someone in the house cried out, "Huh?"

Kou Zhong was greatly shocked. Unexpectedly this person was so superior that he was able to detect his approaching; his martial art skill was definitely better than the one wearing black night-walker outfit Kou Zhong was stalking earlier. Not daring to be careless, like a lightning he hid behind a cluster of trees nearby.

A gust of wind ensued, a man in dark clothes flew out of the window, his luminous eyes scanned the surrounding, and then he jumped onto the roof.

The person in black clothes just now also jumped out the window, walked around the building to the west window, and called out in tender voice, "Nobody's here! Are you sure you did not hear it wrong?" She was wearing a hood, so that only her eyes and nose were visible.

At his hiding place, Kou Zhong mused inwardly, 'Turns out it's a girl,' but he was sure that he had not heard her voice before.

The man jumped down to the ground. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he said with a laugh, "Perhaps a rat passed by! It's always good to be a bit more careful."

Kou Zhong cursed in his heart, 'Your Die is a rat!' Narrowing his eyes until they appeared as a line, he looked at the man.

The man was between twenty-four, twenty-five, not too tall, but his shoulders broad and his waist solid. Although he could not be considered good looking, but there was a hint of manly man in him.

He was talking and laughing with the woman, but there was no smiling expression on his eyes; they look grim and callous. Under his thick eyebrows, his two eyes continuously scanned every nook and cranny in the dark courtyard, but somehow he missed the underbrush only about ten paces away from him.

The women spoke intimately, "How could I dare not to be careful? Aren't I afraid to receive punishment from you like the other night?"

The man burst into lewd laughter; the arm around her waist moved toward her fragrant butts and he said, "It's getting late, the old guy will be back from the feast soon, and I need to make a report. If we are successful this time, I can guarantee endless glory, splendor wealth and rank for you to enjoy."

'What a pity!' Kou Zhong cried out inwardly; unexpectedly he would not have the opportunity to eavesdrop their plots.

Unwilling to part, the woman said, "The old ghost still has to deal with a lot of things, he would not be back this early. The night is still young!"

The tone of her voice was so suggestive that even Kou Zhong who was eavesdropping also felt the enticing force; he could not help praying to the Heaven that the man would stay, so that he could learn more about their secret.

Who would have thought that the man remained unmoved? His eyebrows slightly rose, his face was back into its callous expression, and he said with a sinister smile, "If we are delayed, I might be falling under your coquettish hooves' punishment; go back quickly!"

The woman whined, "You really have a heart of stone; you already sent me to sleep with the old ghost, leaving me unsatisfied every night, and when a rare opportunity arises, you still refuse to comfort me. Hee! But what nujia loves the most is your heroic air and generosity. Off we go!"

After kissing each other in the mouth, the two people promptly left in separate directions. Without the slightest hesitation Kou Zhong ran after the man.

If he heard that s1ut's voice again, he was sure he would be able to recognize her. Right now he was most curious about how this man would overcome the Ranch's natural stronghold to go back to the outside world.

Besides, his hands were terribly itching right now.

Lu Miaozi said cheerfully, "Garden landscape design is a natural design. The gist of it is to bring out the power of the scenery, just like painting a dragon and dotting in the eyes. In such a clear matter like this, in addition to the things mentioned above, it has to be wide open and clear; not only it will harmonized mental cultivation, it will also trigger the mystery known only to Heaven. Thus this is not a simple principle at all."

Noticing that Xu Ziling was nodding continuously, he asked in amazement, "Such an ethereal, difficult ideas, yet you are listening with smiled of exultation?"

Xu Ziling calmly replied, "Since setting foot in the Castle, I already have the feeling that Mister has just described. It's just that I can't describe it as exquisite and as thoroughly and in appropriate terms as Mister did, so when listening to it, I am very delighted."

Lu Miaozi was dumbstruck for a while. Finally, half delighted half frustrated he

said, “I really want to find something that when you hear it, you won’t understand. Ha! Actually, I ought to be happy, just like meeting an intimate friend or something; otherwise, it would be like casting pearls before swine [orig. playing lute to a cow], perhaps I would have been so angry that I lost several days of my life.”

After taking a long, long breath, Lu Miaozi went on, “Although there are countless changes in landscape design, only nine are important, *i.e.* space, light and shade, partition, lining, form, hue, climate, scent, and the type of fruit you want to offer. Do you have it memorized?”

Xu Ziling repeated what he said, word for word.

“Do you understand it?” Lu Miaozi probed further.

Grabbing his head, Xu Ziling said, “Mister explained it so clearly, what’s not to understand? However, from those nine items, I can’t think of a way to use the last two in martial art; the rest may be put to good use. It’s only now do I understand that on the highest level, all that Mister had said so far are interlinked.”

Lu Miaozi smiled wryly and said, “When did I explain that? Even if you beat me to death I would have not believed that merely based on these several sentences you already understand the essence of what I researched for many years. Why don’t you explain to me the first key point, space?”

Xu Ziling smiled and said, “What if I explain it incorrectly?”

Lu Miaozi roared in wild laughter; patting Xu Ziling’s shoulders vigorously, he said, while still laughing hilariously, “Over the last thirty years, I have never been as delighted as tonight; I can even say that perhaps my life has just been extended for a few days. Go ahead! Do you think I, Lu Miaozi, am so narrow-minded that I can’t even tolerate mistakes?”

And thus Xu Ziling explained, “Space is something that exists everywhere. For example, when two people are facing each other, the space between them will change constantly; whoever grasps this space concept will grasp the chance to

seize victory. Landscape design is the same way, it suggests the concept of space; for example: a residential building behind a high wall; there is a far-reaching concept of space, as if there is an abyss behind the house. All those level plains/high plains, high/low or visible/invisible, looks big in the midst of small, are all about space composition. Am I wrong?”

Remaining calm and collected, Lu Miaozi asked, “What about light and shade?”

Xu Ziling replied, “Actually, it is directional issue; facing the sun or facing away from the sun, the scenery will be completely different. Take the tall forest grown at oblique angle west of Mister’s small two-story building for example; they can provide heavy shade during the full light of day. Another example would be under the bright sun or moonlight, the shadows on the wall moves, banana shades cover the window, parasol tree [*Sterculia platanifolia*] shades extend on the ground, Chinese scholar tree [*Sophora japonica*] shades cover the front courtyard. Just by exploiting this kind of light and shade, we can create unlimited creative concept.”

Without giving Xu Ziling time to think, Lu Miaozi skipped to the fifth item, form.

Staying casual, Xu Ziling replied, “That is like painting dragon with fine points; *i.e.* involving linked items in the landscape design. For example courtyard, atrium, moon platform, intersection, and the like; also ancient vines, old trees, balcony, benches, railing, fence, or perhaps gazebo, veranda, elevated pavilion, rotunda, rockery, fishpond, small bridges, and so on, stitched together to form the scenery, so that people will look it with pleasure.”

Lu Miaozi slapped the table and sighed, “You, this kid, have finished your apprenticeship. Get lost now! Come back tomorrow!”

Book 9 Chapter 10 – Gratitude And Grudges Spanning Two Generations

When Xu Ziling was leaving Lu Miaozi's little house, he almost burst into a song to vent his excitement.

'Having a conversation with the wise is better than studying for ten years'. This saying probably described this case the best.

Many things that usually stayed as clear as mud even after he bitterly pondered over it, suddenly made sense.

Just like after blazing sun drove away the dark clouds, now he was able to see ten-thousand li of clear skies.

This 'escaping one' principle would enable him to real infinite benefits throughout his life, it was more formidable than discovering a breakthrough consummate skill.

When he stepped into the gate leading to the rear courtyard, the alarm suddenly went off in his heart.

The feeling that he usually got when someone was spying on him in the dark.

From the abstruse mysterious realm Xu Ziling immediately returned to reality. Regaining his composure, he quickly restrained his true qi, and continued walking to his room in ordinary people's heavy steps.

The first watch of the night [between 7-9pm] has already passed; the moon was already high in the sky.

He decided to use 'no change' to deal with 'ten-thousand changes', deliberately pretending to be completely off-guard as he walked along the corridor surrounding the space between the building and the courtyard, toward the front door of his room.

He deduced that whoever was watching him must have already been lying in ambush somewhere inside the room, while Kou Zhong was strolling outside to look for Li Xiuning.

It would be strange indeed if anybody from the Ranch came looking for them at this time and was not surprised to find the room was empty. With this thought, he felt relieved and simply pushed the door and walked in.

A sword qi assaulted his body.

In that instant, Xu Ziling already determined that the attacker was the outstanding beauty [orig. national grace, divine fragrance] Shang Xiuxun; moreover, although the sword carried ferocious momentum, it still left some leeway, and was not meant to take his life at all.

"Ah!" The edge of the sword already rested on Xu Ziling's throat.

Shang Xiuxun's cold-frost-like face was right in front of his. "Where have you been?" she coldly asked.

Xu Ziling used his power to drain the blood from his face; pretending to be scared out of his wits, he replied with trembling voice, "I just went to the small pavilion by the cliff at the back to enjoy the cool air!"

The tip of Shang Xiuxun's sword emitted powerful qi, penetrating deep into his channels. Fortunately he had learned the skill he stole from Wanwan, and applied it pragmatically to send his vortex of qi to the yong quan acupoint on his

left foot a step ahead of Shang Xiuxun, so that the qi in his meridians was only slightly stronger than average person. Unfortunately however, he was unable to maintain this condition for too long, but he really did not have any other alternative.

Sure enough, Shang Xiuxun's true qi reached his dantian and circulated there for two cycles before she retrieved it away. Returning her sword to its sheathe, she hissed, "Where is that good Xiongdi of yours?"

Xu Ziling breathed a sigh of relief for real; he said, "He had some tummy problem, and went to ... hey ... Changzhu ought to know?"

Half-believing half-doubting Shang Xiuxun stared hard at him for a moment, "Light the lantern first," she ordered.

Xu Ziling groaned inwardly; if Kou Zhong did not return soon, even with his silver tongue he would not be able to convince this beauty with above average intelligence.

The lantern gradually brightened, bathing the room in its gentle and warm light.

"Sit down!" Shang Xiuxun ordered.

Shang Xiuxun waited until Xu Ziling was sitting properly in the chair by the window before she took the chair by the table in the middle of the room. With her pretty eyes shoot sharp rays, she fixed her gaze on him and said, "You must have known Li Xiuning before, haven't you?"

It was only then did Xu Ziling understand the reason she was looking for them. Pretending to be stunned, he asked, "Who's Li Xiuning?"

Shang Xiuxun smiled and said, "You are acting very well. With Li Xiuning's self-cultivation and well-composed character, it was impossible that she would suddenly make much fuss about nothing. You want to conceal it from me; I wonder if you would confess after being served the house rules? This is called

refusing a toast only to be forced to drink a forfeit.”

Xu Ziling mused that probably Kou Zhong would not return tonight, so if he still wanted to cover up the left and conceal the right, he could only cook up some dumb excuses. But if he had a falling out with Shang Xiuxun, he would not be able to come to Lu Miaozi’s place tomorrow night.

With a wry smile, which came from his heart, he said, “If Changzhu don’t believe us, we will leave tomorrow. Even if we really know Li Xiuning, we did not violate any Ranch rules. Ay! I really don’t know what to say.”

A complex expression, which was hard to decipher, appeared in Shang Xiuxun’s eyes; as she was about to speak, footsteps were heard, coming toward their direction. The two people’s eyes immediately fell toward the open door.

Kou Zhong swaggered into the room, “Changzhu!” he blurted out in shock.

Shang Xiuxun looked at him coldly.

Kou Zhong was certainly a genius at practicing fraud; pretending to have a sudden inspiration he said, “Changzhu must be here to admire my treasured saber a bit early!”

Shang Xiuxun’s eyes fell onto the Moon In The Well hanging on his back; she spoke indifferently, “Where have you been? Why do you have to bring a saber?”

Kou Zhong was used to seamless collaboration with Xu Ziling, naturally his gaze flitted toward him first, but without missing a beat his mouth spoke, “Just now Xiao Jing and I ...” He noticed Xu Ziling’s toes were pointing at the direction of the back mountain, and his hand was rubbing his belly; being a smart aleck as he was, he continued, “Hey! Xiao Jing and I went to the back mountain to see that old Mister to learn some skills; we also ate something. Ha!”

“What?” Shang Xiuxun blurted out.

Kou Zhong knew something was not right, but he did not know where he had

‘revealed the cloven foot’.

Xu Ziling hastily tried to remedy the situation. “What did you say,” he angrily said, “Have you forgotten Old Mister’s order?”

Kou Zhong realized suddenly; smiling apologetically, he said, “Although Old Mister told us not to tell anybody, Changzhu is our boss. It’s all right for us not to tell anybody else, but we should not conceal it from her. Xiao Jing, you are so muddleheaded; why haven’t you apologized to Changzhu?”

Xu Ziling continued the charade, “I only know that a real man’s word is worth nine sacred tripods; no wonder after eating Old Mister’s stuff you got diarrhea.”

“Shut up! Both of you!” Shang Xiuxun hissed.

Stunned, the two boys looked at her.

Shang Xiuxun stood up and said, “You two, come with me.”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling followed behind Shang Xiuxun’s alluring back, straight toward Lu Miaozi’s small two-story house.

There was still light at the upper floor, but there was no sound.

Shang Xiuxun looked up to the upper floor’s window; her pretty face lengthened as she shouted heavily, “Old Man [orig. lao tou er, usually used in a rude manner]! You break your promise!”

The two boys jumped out of their skin; they had never expected Shang Xiuxun would be so impolite toward the number one master craftsman in the world who designed and built the Inner Castle’s landscape garden.

Lu Miaozi’s voice was heard, “Changzhu has not visited my An Le Wo for three years; why don’t you come upstairs and enjoy a cup of Six-fruit Brew with the Old Man?”

Shang Xiuxun turned frosty; she said coldly, "This Changzhu is not interested. I only know that you broke your promise; so are you going to leave on your own, or do you need me to personally kick you out?"

Listening to this, the two boys were at a loss; they did not understand why Shang Xiuxun adopted a 'like fire meets water' attitude toward Lu Miaozi.

Lu Miaozi sighed and said, "When did I break my promise?"

Shang Xiuxun replied heavily, "Three years ago when Niang passed away, you promised in front of Niang that you would not meddle in our Ranch's affairs, and that you would not leave the back mountain even for half a step, which was why I let you stay. But now you have the audacity to teach my Ranch's people; if that is not breaking your promise, what is it?"

Lu Miaozi's head suddenly appeared on the window. He looked down and stared blankly at Shang Xiuxun.

Shang Xiuxun was furious, "I forbid you to look at me!" she shouted.

Lu Miaozi sighed. Shifting his gaze to the night sky above, he yearned, "You look so much like your Niang."

Regaining her composure, Shang Xiuxun coldly said, "I forbid you to mention Niang. You are basically not worthy to talk about her. Until today I still don't understand why Niang adamantly wanted to protect you. All right! Are you or are you not going to nicely get out of here on your own?"

Lu Miaozi asked softly, "Are they your Ranch's people?"

Shang Xiuxun was taken aback, "They are hired by me, personally. If they are not my Ranch's people, what do you think they are?"

Lu Miaozi's gaze fell on her face again; he said with a sigh, "It hasn't been three years, they are still outsiders. Ay!" He was clearly unwilling to argue with

Shang Xiuxun, but in this case he was forced to; otherwise, he would have to leave in a big hurry.

Shang Xiuxun was indeed stumped; stomping her feet, she said, “Lu Miaozi, Niang is dead, why are you still reluctant to leave?”

Lu Miaozi sighed and said, “Is it possible to give ten more days? After that, Changzhu will definitely not see me again.”

Shang Xiuxun took a deep breath and said, “Looking at Niang’s face, this Changzhu agrees to grant you ten days grace period.”

Turning around, she glowered at the two boys and barked, “Get lost and go back to sleep!”

Lying on their bed, the two boys were silent for a long time.

Finally Kou Zhong was unable to hold back, “I found some spies,” he blurted out.

Xu Ziling responded indifferently, “Didn’t you go out to look for your Princess Xiuning?”

Kou Zhong sat up and said with a wry smile, “I did want to look for her, but along the way I came across the spies.” Thereupon he narrated his experience.

Xu Ziling frowned and said, “If you ran after that guy, how come you were back so quickly?”

Kou Zhong dejectedly said, “That guy has hooks and ropes and ‘wooden cut’ [I don’t know what this is: 木屑] kind of tools to climb the mountain, he was able to hike precipitous cliff, and I did not dare to follow him up too closely, so in just several twists and turns I lost him, making I nearly die of anger.”

But then he turned cheerful and said, “This is called blessing in disguise,

because if I did not come back in time, Beautiful Changzhu would discover our true identity.”

Xu Ziling also sat up and said, “You said that rubbing tummy means you have to go to the bathroom, how come you said you were eating something?”

Kou Zhong blurted out laughing and said, “You did not show your ‘going to the bathroom’ expression, how could I tell?”

Xu Ziling was also amused; thinking deeply, he said, “This time you clearly made a mistake; if the one you were following was that s1ut, you would know by now the spy who is colluding with the enemy.”

Kou Zhong sneered and said, “With so many clues, are you afraid she might escape out of the hollow of our palm?”

After a short pause, he continued confidently, “First of all, this **** must be somebody’s concubine, plus she has not been someone’s concubine for too long. Secondly, the sucker she cheated must be one of the Ranch people attending the banquet last night, and since they referred to him as the old guy, only Shang Zhen and Liang Zhi are eligible to be in the list. So easy to investigate, what are you afraid of?”

Recalling the two gorgeous women massaging Shang Zhen when they first met, Xu Ziling nodded and said, “Shang Zhen holds the highest possibility; but this kind of case is not easy to investigate. Besides, even if we knew who she is, unless we reveal our own identity, we still can’t do anything to her.”

“We can start from her lover,” Kou Zhong said, “He will come back here, sooner or later.”

Xu Ziling said, “We’ll find a way to examine that building tomorrow, there bound to be some ‘spider’s thread and horse track’ to be found.”

Kou Zhong giggled and said, “Xu Shaoye seems to be very concerned about Beautiful Changzhu, ha! I think she was just using all kinds of excuses to be close

to you.”

Xu Ziling said irately, “You seem to forget about Li Xiuning already; otherwise, how can you still laugh?”

Kou Zhong was stunned, “Because of that adulterous couple plus Beautiful Changzhu, I really forgot about her. Therefore, I can safely say that I am able to get her out of my mind. Right! I forgot to ask you what skill you learned from Lu Miaozi? Is it something fun?”

Thereupon Xu Ziling had Lu Miaozi’s abstruse theory completely out in the open.

Emotionally moved, Kou Zhong said, “This theory is more profound than the Yijian Technique; we must explore it to the end. What else?”

Xu Ziling explained the nine important aspects of landscape design; who would have thought that he was only on the third item of the list when Kou Zhong already yawned and interrupted him, “There is one thing that I feel very strange; didn’t Shang Xiuxun say that three years ago Lu Miaozi promised not to leave the back mountain even for half a step? Yet he obviously slipped out from time to time. There must be a secret tunnel somewhere; otherwise, how could nobody ever detect his coming and going?”

Knowing that Kou Zhong had no interest in landscape design, Xu Ziling lay down and said, “Sleep!”

‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’

The two boys were absolutely unwilling to get out of their bed.

Lan Gu’s harsh voice screamed from outside the door, “Have you become thieves last night? Do you know what time it is? In the entire Ranch, only the two of you are still asleep. Will you believe me if I say I am going to get in and tear your bed down?”

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling looked at each other with wry smile on their faces. The former jumped out of bed to open the door and said, "The two of us went to the back mountain to accompany Changzhu admiring the moon, and we talked all night long. Can't we just sleep a bit longer?"

Lan Gu was immediately scared by him and stopped talking. "Changzhu?" she blurted out.

Kou Zhong continued boldly, "If you don't believe me just ask Changzhu, see if we really went with her to the back mountain or not."

Noticing the bright sunlight outside, Xu Ziling realized that the sun was already three-pole high. Only because the two boys were accustomed to using their sleep time to train, plus they did not have enough sleep the last two nights, they felt that it was not enough. "Don't make a fuss!" he cried out, "We are awake!"

Lan Gu's horse face alternated between red and white, but the tone of her voice was a bit more polite, "Changzhu is taking Princess Ning on a tour around the Ranch," she said, "When they are back, Princess Ning is going to visit the kitchen to see how you prepare the smoked fish. This is Changzhu's order. You haven't prepared anything yet?"

As Lan Gu was about to leave, Kou Zhong called her, "There are a few things that we, two brothers, really don't understand; every time Lan Gu came to us, you always want us to work like an ox, to work like a horse. But nobody ever told us where the public bath is, where the latrine is. Not to mention how to solve the problem of getting three square meals every day. Last night Changzhu even wondered why we, two able-bodied men, have to crowd into one bed. Who's in charge of these things anyway?"

Appearing behind Kou Zhong, Xu Ziling laughed and said, "Therefore, we decided to slacken off in our work today, unless there is great improvement in our living arrangement."

At first Lan Gu put her hands on her water-snake-like waist, but then she let her hands dropped limply by her side. "It's just that these past two days we are extremely busy that we have no time to pay attention to you," she said weakly,

“Go freshen up and change your clothes first, we’ll talk later.”

The two boys smiled victoriously.

Book 9 Chapter 11 – Wholehearted Gratitude

Xu Ziling was about to slip out of the pastry kitchen when Kou Zhong grabbed him and pulled him back. Helplessly he smiled wryly and said, “The entire process of making the smoked fish has been prepared properly; to explain it, the famous chef Kou, whose mouth is like a torrent, can handle it singlehandedly with ease. By firmly detaining Xiao Ren in here, don’t you feel like you are wasting manpower?”

With pained expression on his face Kou Zhong said, “Just consider me begging you to stay this time, all right? Without you here, I am afraid things will go wrong. Hey!”

“What can go wrong?” Xu Ziling asked, “Give me an example?”

Clearing his throat, Kou Zhong said, “For example, in a moment of rashness, I might abandon the great undertaking in favor of my feeling toward the Princess. Or perhaps I will lose face as a real man to kneel in front of her, begging her to marry me. Ay! One lifetime, two brothers; please be obedient and stay here to give me moral support.”

Xu Ziling laughed in spite of himself, “You think she is coming to have a tryst with you?” he asked, “I can guarantee that Lan Gu will be by her side to lick her butts, even Beautiful Changzhu might be here, glaring like a tiger watching its prey, to see what dirty little secret you have with Li Xiuning.”

Kou Zhong shook his head and said, “Your experience with women is still somewhat inferior to Laozi’s. I don’t know if you noticed Princess’ demeanor last

night; that kind of 'her thoughts in a whirl', 'not knowing what to do' expression, clearly represented the fact that she has no affection toward me at all. Therefore, she is not coming today for that, or else she will find all kinds of excuses to dismiss others."

Xu Ziling said in astonishment, "Not only you grew an acupuncture orifice on your tian ling acupoint [i.e. top of the head], you also grew a pair of eyes there. I plainly saw last night you fixed your eyes on the floor, how did you see the subtle changes in her expression?"

A bit embarrassed, Kou Zhong said, "A martial art master [orig. gao shou, lit. high hand] like me, merely depending on my perception I would know a lot of things; do you understand? Xu 'low hand'? So, get back in here!"

Xu Ziling raised his hands, "Can I go to the bathroom first?" he asked.

Kou Zhong changed tactics, hugging Xu Ziling as warmly as he could, short of giving him a kiss, he said, "My good Xiongdi, remember, the earlier you go, the earlier you'll come back."

Xu Ziling was indeed thinking of slipping away, but Kou Zhong preemptively said, "One lifetime, two brothers; we advance and retreat together."

Unable to get away, Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "Such a timid guy, how could you contend for hegemony of the world?"

"Where are you two going?"

Stunned, the two boys turned around.

Shang Xiuxun and Li Xiuning were walking along the promenade, and would soon catch up with them. Surprisingly, there was no entourage.

Shang Xiuxun was still wearing tight warrior outfit, with a feather on her hat, so that in her loveliness, there was a vigorous heroic air.

Li Xiuning was surprisingly plain and simple; she wore a pure white long gown with blue vest with yellow-flower pattern on it. She appeared lovely and touching. This beauty was similar to Song Yuzhi, in that she also carried a particular grandeur and daintiness specific to women who were born in high-class family and big clan, a personality trait that can make any man feel small in her presence.

The two women were outside the corridor, basking in the beautiful sunlight, so that their glamour radiated all around, so that they appeared to be exuding some kind of exotic natural endowment that transcended the mortal world.

Momentarily the two boys could only stare blankly at them.

As the two women elegantly came to their presence, Li Xiuning graciously said, "I'm sorry! I made the two Great Shifu waiting for a long time!"

The two boys hastily saluted and answered humbly.

Shang Xiuxun spoke indifferently, "Xiao Ning, you explain to Princess, I need to talk to Xiao Jing for a moment."

Seeing Li Xiuning, Kou Zhong forgot everything else. He also wished that he could have an opportunity to talk with her privately; thereupon he hurriedly took Li Xiuning to the kitchen.

Shang Xiuxun took Xu Ziling toward the garden at the rear courtyard. Reaching a pavilion, she stopped and said, "What did that Old Man tell you last night?"

"He taught us how to design garden and landscape," Xu Ziling replied, "Would Changzhu like me to repeat it for you?"

Turning her back toward him, Shang Xiuxun asked, "He didn't say anything else?"

Xu Ziling sighed and said, "He also told us about himself, how thirty years ago he was wounded by the enemy, and how these past few days the old injury

flared out, that his days are numbered!”

Shang Xiuxun’s tender body trembled slightly, “What?” she blurted out.

Xu Ziling continued in low voice, “According to Mr. Lu’s own estimate, he would only live eight to ten more days. Perhaps because of this he kind of look upon us with favor!”

Shang Xiuxun slowly turning her tender body around, her beautiful eyes looked deep into Xu Ziling’s eyes for half a day, before she said softly, “Have you two thought about your own future? Will you be satisfied being two chefs for the rest of your life?”

She suddenly changed the subject like that, Xu Ziling was caught off guard and was at a loss of how to respond, hence he only gave her noncommittal answer, “If we don’t become chefs, what can we do?”

Displeased, Shang Xiuxun said, “You are originally not chefs anyway, you were merely salt smugglers; how dare you say such thing to me.”

It was only then did Xu Ziling remember what Kou Zhong had told these people; he calmly said, “Whatever we do, in the end it’s just looking for money. Smuggling salt carries very high risk, we may lose our life savings at any time; how can it be compared to earning steady income of half a tael of real gold each month?”

Shang Xiuxun’s eyes shot sharp rays, her words contained deep meaning as she asked, “After earning enough money, what are you going to do?”

Xu Ziling improvised on the spot, “It depends on the current political situation; if the world is back to its unified peace, we will return to our hometown and open a small restaurant. Hey! For us, this is terrific!”

Shang Xiuxun smiled and said, “You are still lying to me? Just by listening to your clear reasoning, the elegance of your style of conversation and response, I know that you are definitely not ordinary folks. Besides, Lu Miaozi is haughty and

conceited, how could he have any interest in spending any time with you? Who are you? Why did you come here?”

Xu Ziling groaned inwardly; fortunately his mind churned an idea, immediately he found a countermeasure. Smiling wryly, he said, “Changzhu is indeed formidable. The two of us are actually Yangzhou people. Niang’s family was aristocratic family in Yangzhou, we ran a restaurant that had good reputation locally. Afterwards the muddleheaded ruler was assassinated, Yangzhou was thrown into chaos, the mobs and the soldiers looted all over the place, implicating us that we were left destitute and homeless. We wandered around and ended up in Yuhang. At first we worked in a restaurant; later on we saw how profitable salt trading was, hence we took the risk to run one. Who would have thought that we met robbers along the way, and were barely able to escape with our lives? And that was how we ended up here.”

What he said was half truth and half false; unless Shang Xiuxun was able to confirm certain details of his story, it would be difficult to find any flaw. He was not concerned that this beauty might find out their real identity in Yangzhou, because other than Yuwen Huaji and a limited number of people, nobody knew that they were actually Yangzhou’s ruffians.

Shang Xiuxun stared at his face for a moment; her jet-black eyebrows knitted slightly, she asked, “Where did you learn your martial art from?”

“We were Shi Long’s martial school disciples,” Xu Ziling replied, “Later on Shi Long offended that muddleheaded ruler, he was executed, along with all his relatives. Fortunately [maternal] grandfather spent a lot of money on our behalf, so that we were not implicated [orig. guilt by association].”

Shang Xiuxun looked as if she did not know what else to ask; she was silent for a long time. Only now did Xu Ziling really breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that she has not heard anything about Shi Long’s relationship with the ‘Secret to Long Life’.

Shang Xiuxun suddenly looked at him up and down several times, and then calmly said, “Honestly, people with physical and personality traits like you, two brothers, are really rare in the world, otherwise the Old Man would not have high regards on you. However, because you have missed the prime age to start

training martial art, no matter how hard you train, your accomplishment would be limited. Ay! Being chefs is a waste of talent for people like you; therefore, while the Old Man has not died yet, you might as well ask him to impart on you some kind of unique skill, perhaps I will consider hiring you in different capacity, and thus you wouldn't have to waste your lives."

For the first time Xu Ziling started to have a good impression on her; he respectfully said, "Thank you very much for Changzhu's direction."

Somehow Shang Xiuxun let out a gentle sigh before saying, "You may go back now! Li Xiuning ought to finish learning about how to make smoked fish; what's so attractive about firewood anyway?"

The last sentence made Xu Ziling stared blankly at her.

As soon as Kou Zhong stepped into the kitchen, he pointed to the various ingredients neatly organized on the table, and in deadly earnest expression he started to explain, "This is the seasoning, and here we have the sauce; this ..."

"There's no one else around!" Li Xiuning cut him off.

It was as if Kou Zhong's acupoint had just been sealed; he froze for half a day, before finally hung his hands and said dejectedly, "Princess, please grant your advice."

Li Xiuning moved up behind him and said softly, "Er Ge [second brother] was very concerned over you, because you were unwilling to follow him in conquering the world, he often felt unhappy. This time I can see you again, it's really great. Ay! How did you end up hiding here and being chefs? Was it because you were afraid of Li Mi?"

Kou Zhong suddenly straightened up his back and said coldly, "We are not afraid of anybody!"

Li Xiuning cheerfully replied, "No wonder Er Ge praises you without cease; just by looking at wherever you go you turn the sky and the earth upside down, I

know your ability. Now I understand Er Ge's evaluation on you in those days was not simply exaggerated praise."

The fragrance of Li Xiuning's breath as she spoke was wafting gently into Kou Zhong's nose; he shook his head with a bitter smile as he walked over toward the window. As he stared blankly outside the window, at the scenery of people moving about in the courtyard under the bright sunny sky, his mind was in turmoil.

He has finally made it. But he could not go back to the former days. If Li Xiuning had said those words in the past, he would not have to bow out sadly, did not dare to compete with Chai Shao over her fragrant heart, because of low self-esteem.

Seeing he walked over and was lost in thought, Li Xiuning sighed inwardly.

Based on her orchid heart's intelligence, she already understood Kou Zhong's feeling for her even then. But with her family's power, talent, and beauty, there were an untold number of men who fell for her; therefore, she did not take it seriously.

But this time seeing Kou Zhong again, not only he had turned into a dignified, handsome and great man, the most attractive thing about him was that he exuded some kind of hard-to-describe personality traits. It's just that the matter between Chai Shao and her had already been settled conclusively; no one could alter it, including her. But she did not wish to change it either.

While she was in dilemma, not knowing whether she should stay where she was or should walk over toward Kou Zhong, Kou Zhong's voice entered her ears, "Are you married?"

Li Xiuning's tender body shook dramatically; hanging down her small head, she sadly said, "Although I am not yet married, my situation is not much difference to a married woman."

Kou Zhong threw his head back and let out a long laugh; like a whirlwind he turned around and with his eyes shooting lightning-like light he said, "Very well!

I'll consider you as someone else's wife. Perhaps you'll find it difficult to understand, but I really am happy with your answer, because from now on I can get rid of the distraction in my heart and wholeheartedly fight for my ideals."

In Li Xiuning's eyes, he seemed to be changing into another person, revealing Kou Zhong's insufferably arrogant, overbearing heroic spirit, that she had never imagined would appear from him. Shocked, she was momentarily unable to say anything.

Kou Zhong's awe-inspiring, radiating all around air suddenly turned into an incomparable tenderness; revealing his bright, sunshine-like signature smile, his flashing snow-white teeth, he said apologetically, "Xiaodi was momentarily unable to restrain emotions, and have frightened Princess; I am terribly sorry. Looks like Princess' interest today is not in smoked fish, but is us, the two boys, instead. So now Princess ought to know the answer."

Taking a deep breath, Li Xiuning fought to keep her emotion, which was fluctuating endlessly due to Kou Zhong's instigation, under control. She nodded and said, "Although Xiuning understood Kou Xiong's kindly feeling, it is still hard for me to avoid feeling extreme regret and disappointment. I wonder whether there is still room for amendment?"

Kou Zhong nearly turned from hero [ying xiong] to a coward [lit. gou xiong, black bear] and blurted out, 'Only if you are willing to marry me!' Fortunately he remembered Song Yuzhi and the Shuanglong Bang he personally founded; pressing hard this urge, he calmly smiled and said, "Life is interesting because although we lost a lot of things, we also gained a lot of other things. There are moments of joy, there are also days of wounded spirit and broken soul."

And then, striding in front of Li Xiuning's tender body, he looked down and stared deep into the beautiful princess' beautiful eyes; his tiger-eyes shooting out ocean-deep emotion that stirred her heartstrings and made her shivering inside. With an incomparable tenderness in his voice he said, "Perhaps Xiuning has never had me, Kou Zhong, in your heart, but in my, Kou Zhong's heart, you, Xiuning, was the first woman that made me fully enjoyed the kind of feeling that made me difficult to sleep at night, that made me worry about personal gains and losses, but also made me enjoyed the matchless excitement of the first love. Although it was only for a night, it has made me extremely grateful. Thank you."

“Ah!”

By the time Li Xiuning was crying out tenderly, Kou Zhong already left the kitchen in big strides.

And he never looked back.

Shang Xiuxun and Xu Ziling, one in front of the other, arrived at the kitchen door. Seeing Kou Zhong strode out with grim expression on his face, they were both stunned.

Without waiting for Shang Xiuxun to ask any question, upright and unafraid Kou Zhong walked past the two and muttered, “I am going to the latrine.”

Book 9 Chapter 12 – Underground Collection

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling sat side-by-side on the low stonewall by the pavilion on the back mountain, facing the precipitous cliff towering in the sky; below their feet was precisely the hundred-zhang deep abyss where the falling water rolled on endlessly.

After Kou Zhong finished listening to Xu Ziling's latest generation of lies he told Shang Xiuxun, Kou Zhong wiped the cold sweats from his forehead and said, "Fortunately I said I was in a hurry to go to the bathroom; otherwise the beautiful Changzhu might grab me and ask questions, and then we would have to jump down this ravine."

Craning his neck to look down into the rapids at the bottom, he wondered aloud, "Based on our martial art skill, if we jump down, would we die or not?"

Xu Ziling smiled slightly without saying anything, but his eyes seemed to penetrate the deepest part of Kou Zhong's heart.

Finally Kou Zhong surrendered, "Why didn't you ask me what happened between Li Xiuning and me a moment ago?"

Xu Ziling sneered and said, "Didn't you say that the martial art from the 'Secret to Long Life' has turned you more and more cold-hearted? You also said that for the sake of vying for the world, you would do anything by hook or by crook, and that you'd sacrifice everything you valued in your life? Since that is the case, do I still need to beg for an answer from you?"

Kou Zhong slapped his thigh and said with a sigh, "Ling Shao, this time you are

wrong. The fact is that I am extremely vexed right now, because I could not help asking her if she was married to that muddled egg Chai Shao [Translator's note: I feel that 'muddled egg' is funnier than scoundrel, b@stard or @\$shole ...]. Just think! Ling Shao! Supposing her answer was 'I'm not married yet', how would I handle her? I was fully aware that by asking that question I was spinning a cocoon around myself, yet I still asked her. Tell me, why did I do that?"

Xu Ziling's response was tepid, "So what did she say?"

Grieved, Kou Zhong replied, "She said that although she has not officially married, but there's not much difference with a married woman."

Xu Ziling smiled wryly and said, "That is akin to saying that the one she loves is Chai Shao. That answer is indeed very difficult to bear, and also made me feel for the first time that you deserve sympathy. So what are you going to do? The moves you make in the battlefield of love will give you more headaches than the moves in the life and death's confrontation, plus the battlefield of love will leave both sides wounded."

Kou Zhong coolly said, "Hence the reason I turned grief and indignation into strength; I told her I did not care in the slightest, and I thanked her for giving me the taste of grief for losing my love. With great difficulty I resisted the intense urge to kiss her and stormed out of the door. With my back against her, I felt so much pain that my entire body went numb."

Xu Ziling casually remarked, "So did you go to the latrine to hide while weeping in bitter tears?"

Stunned, Kou Zhong turned his head to stare at him, "Don't you have any sympathy toward the poor me?" he asked.

Xu Ziling coldly replied, "Because the one deserving my sympathy is not you, but Li Xiuning."

Kou Zhong had his eyes fixed on the cliff across the canyon; he mumbled as if he was talking to himself, "I was indeed a bit out of line, but at that time I really had a feeling that the more hurt her, the happier I would be. That was a

completely out of control emotions, I know in my heart that I'm still holding tight on her."

Xu Ziling sighed and said, "Thereupon you gave it your all in your attempt to, in a snap of your fingers, make her that she won't be able to forget you. Isn't that more cruel and ruthless to her?"

As if he was in delirious ravings Kou Zhong said, "Kill me now! I am in unbearable pain."

Xu Ziling reached out to put his hand on his shoulder; he said with a wry smile, "I spoke without tact too much! Matters between men and women are like this, basically there is no logical explanation. Whoever has a bit stronger 'divine power to protect the body' will suffer less harm; upon inspection, looks to me that it's very difficult for your 'divine power to protect the body' to meet a minimum standard."

Kou Zhong said in astonishment, "You said you don't have any tact, but now I just want to cry bitterly."

The two boys 'you look at me, I gaze at you', and then a smile started to form at the corners of their mouths, followed by a chorus of laughter and difficult-to-discern bitter-sweet hot tears, which warmed their hearts, and enforced the mutual feeling of sincere friendship between the two brothers.

Gasping for breath, Xu Ziling patted Kou Zhong's shoulder and said painfully, "Every time you lose your love, you are dragging me down and leaving me confused; therefore, I am the real victim here."

Kou Zhong said with a wry smile, "Why is it that although I have suffered losing my love for the first time early on, the second time around is still unbearable? Not only that, it's getting worse!"

Shrugging his shoulders, Xu Ziling said, "What's so strange about that? It's because your love to her was even deeper."

Kou Zhong seemed to be fully recovered; he nonchalantly nodded his head and said, “What you said is not without reason; over time, dripping water can wear out hard rock, therefore, right now my heart must have hundreds of holes and thousands of cavities. This is called ‘the great method of dripping tears on the heart’; it’s a ‘different tune played with equal skill’ with Lu Miaozi’s ‘escaping one’, because Li Xiuning is precisely my ‘escaping one’. Even though Shang Xiuxun is half a notch superior to her, in my heart I only have her.”

And then he added, “The rice has already been cooked, there’s no more stopping. To conform to the Yijian Technique, what will our next step be?”

Xu Ziling calmed down; pondering deeply, he said, “We’ll have to find a way to identify that slut first.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said, “If only we could go door to door and knock.”

Knitting his brows, Xu Ziling said, “With your exceptional ears, eavesdropping within a radius of a hundred li should not be a difficult thing to do!”

Kou Zhong laughed despite of himself, “Real exaggeration!” he said, “Come on!”

One after another the two boys jumped down from the stonewall and strode away from the pavilion.

Arriving at the winding corridor, they were met by Xiao Juan’s slim and graceful figure. “I found you!” she called out cheerfully.

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Shang Xiuxun was sitting upright and still on one side of the spacious study room, engrossed on a book she was holding with both hands, seemingly oblivious that Big Sister Fu has arrived, with the two boys right behind her.

Across the small garden outside was precisely the reception hall where Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling met her for the first time. At that time they had their spirit

and soul upside down by this beauty's charming and touching mannerism as she sampled their handicraft.

The fact was, in her heart, Shang Xiuxun hated herself.

Even she did not understand why she loved to see these two boys so much; perhaps because she was so lonely?

It was not an issue of how many people she had by her side; rather, it was an issue of her state of mind.

She was the only daughter of the former Ranch Master; since her childhood she had been cultivated to be the heir, hence with aloof and remote position, governing her subordinates was as natural as breathing. Everybody venerated her like a deity; only these two boys were the exception, although on the surface they were very respectful. Just by looking at the brazen and wild expression in their eyes when they looked at her, she knew that in their eyes, she was just a woman.

This has sparked a ripple in her heart, something that was fresh and unique.

Big Sister Fu reported, "Two Xiao Shifu are here."

Kou Zhong took a few steps forward; holding his saber with both hands he presented it to her and said, "Treasured Saber is here!"

Seeing Kou Zhong pretending to be respectful and proper, "Pfft!" Shang Xiuxun burst out giggling, just like a blooming fresh flower, so that Big Sister Fu, who seldom saw her beautiful demeanor like this, was stunned.

Noticing the three people were staring at her, Shang Xiuxun strived to suppress her smile; with a wooden face she scolded in low voice, "How many treasured sabers are there in the world?"

Still in low voice she went on, "Fu'er, you may withdraw!"

Big Sister Fu was slightly stunned, and then she withdrew from the study room.

Shang Xiuxun put down the book on the small table by her side. From Kou Zhong's hands she took the Moon in the Well; immediately her face showed astonishment. "I did not expect it to be this heavy," she said in surprise.

Kou Zhong smiled apologetically and said, "This treasured saber is different from ordinary sabers."

Frowning, Shang Xiuxun said, "Why are you standing so close?"

Embarrassed, Kou Zhong stepped back to Xu Ziling's side. Only the latter knew that he really did not wish to part with the Moon in the Well.

With her left hand Shang Xiuxun held the scabbard, with her right hand she lightly grabbed the hilt, but her pretty eyes were fixed on the two boys. She said calmly, "Although this saber is unremarkable at all, plus it's a bit rusty, but somehow when I went back, from time to time the sight of this saber appeared before my eyes, and I have some kind of unspeakable feeling toward it."

Kou Zhong praised her wholeheartedly, "Changzhu indeed has a superior taste, unlike people with mediocre, superficial taste."

Shang Xiuxun was already accustomed with the two boys' conversational manner, which did not regard her as the Ranch Master. Glowering at him, she said, "Who wants you to flatter me?"

'Ring!'

The Moon in the Well went out about half a chi from its scabbard.

Emotionally moved, Shang Xiuxun said, "I have never seen any blade more blunt and more dull, without any shine, than this one, yet I have never seen some kind of loftiness in a simple and unadorned, inelegant blade like this either."

Her pretty eyes shot toward Kou Zhong, she said in a heavy voice, “How did you get this?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Kou Zhong replied, “It was my Ah Ye [(paternal) grandpa who gave it to Die, and Die gave it to me.”

Returning the saber to its scabbard, Shang Xiuxun muttered irresolutely, “I wonder what did that Old Man say about this saber?”

Kou Zhong was slightly stunned; now he remembered that that night he lied about carrying this saber to see Lu Miaozi and learn martial art from him, but Lu Miaozi basically has never seen this saber. However, naturally not answering was not an option, therefore, he replied respectfully, “Mr. Lu said that this saber was the personal weapon of the one saber expert of two hundred years ago, the ‘Saber Overlord’ Ling Shangren; I don’t know how it fell into my paternal grandfather’s hands?”

‘Ring!’

The Moon in the Well was pulled out of its scabbard by Shang Xiuxun’s delicate and beautiful lily-white hand; she drew with it about a dozen saber flowers in front of her, but there was no frightening yellow glow like when Kou Zhong was using it.

A bit disappointed, Shang Xiuxun held the saber still and examined it carefully. She was puzzled, “Is it really rust? But it does not look like rust stain; rather, it’s the texture of the metal specific to the saber’s body.”

Noticing that just like Xiao Xian, Shang Xiuxun did not bring out the saber’s unusual luster, Kou Zhong was even more convinced that he was the true master of this treasured saber. He said proudly, “This is a psychic treasured saber; my grandfather once said that one time a thief broke into our house, this saber unexpectedly let out incessant ringing to warn us!”

Listening to this even Xu Ziling was frowning, thinking that Kou Zhong went too far; but then again, only by doing that would they convince Shang Xiuxun that it

was part of family legend.

Shang Xiuxun glowered at Kou Zhong and said, “You are bragging! Have you ever heard the saber ringing?”

Kou Zhong said with a wry smile, “Last time a thief came, it happened to be resting, so it did not ring.”

Shang Xiuxun was unable to hold back much longer, she burst into silver-bell like moving tender laughter, put the saber back into its scabbard, and tossed it back to Kou Zhong. She said, “Play a move or two, show me how much success you achieved from Shi Long.”

Kou Zhong held the saber across his chest, pulled it out of the scabbard, and hacked into the air several times, using ‘low hand’ moves and techniques unique to Shi Long’s martial school, with all the shortcomings displayed accurately and wonderfully.

Shang Xiuxun covered her laughing mouth and said, “Although your expression is of a martial art master’s, your technique is quite mediocre, ay! You paid money to learn the skill in vain.”

Pretending to refuse to concede, Kou Zhong said, “Please check this out, my move ‘stars fill the sky’!”

He moved the saber and brandished it wildly.

Seeing him going all-out until his face turned red and his ears hot, Shang Xiuxun laughed like a shaking stem of flower; she said, “If you continued like this, there is no need for the enemy to kill you, you would die of exhaustion!”

Kou Zhong awkwardly returned the saber to its sheath; panting, he said, “Sabers are used to attack the enemy; how could you not use any force?”

Shang Xiuxun no longer paid any attention to him; turning to Xu Ziling, she said, “And what is your expertise?”

Xu Ziling was just admiring her alluring, beautiful-beyond-human-comprehension, touching manner while she was laughing; hearing the question, it was as if he had just been awakened from a dream. "I am worse compared to Xiao Ning, please excuse me!"

Irritated, Shang Xiuxun said, "Looks like you disregard me as your Changzhu more and more. Don't you know that what I say is an order?"

But then she smiled and said, "So be it! Avoiding displaying your disgrace to save face is a smart move."

Suddenly rapid footsteps were heard in the distance, but coming fast toward them. The First Manager Liang Zhi's voice was heard outside the door, "Subordinate has an urgent matter needs to be reported to Changzhu."

Still smiling, Shang Xiuxun said, "Da Zhishi, please come in!"

The two boys hastily stepped aside.

Liang Zhi came over toward Shang Xiuxun's seat in large strides. Bowing, he said, "Reporting to Changzhu: there are about 2000 enemies appear about thirty li from west side entrance of the Ranch, they look to be the vanguard regiment of the Four Big Bandits."

Shang Xiuxun's pretty eyes flashed with cold rays; she spoke cool-headedly, "Any movement outside the east side entrance?"

With solemn expression Liang Zhi replied, "There's no report yet."

Shang Xiuxun's gaze fell onto the two boys; she spoke heavily, "You may return to your lodging house. If there is nothing important, do not walk around; understood?"

The two boys promptly acknowledged the order and withdrew from the room.

Closing the door to their room, Kou Zhong sat down by Xu Ziling's side. "This does not make sense," he said, "Anybody knows that Flying Horse Ranch is more difficult to break than any other fortified city; why would the Four Big Bandits abandon their stronghold and attack this place? There must be an intrigue here."

"Could it be only a diversion?" Xu Ziling mused, "Their real target might be the nearby Dangyang or Yuan'an, or even farther down Jingling."

"That is more preposterous," Kou Zhong said, "If I were the Four Big Bandits' adviser, I would concentrate my force to attack one of those cities, to lure the Flying Horse Ranch to send rescue expedition, and then ambush them along the way; that would be the proper thing to do. Once their troops are dispersed, it would be strange indeed if the Ranch would not suffer total defeat."

Suddenly he laughed aloud and said, "The theory that Lu Miaozi invented is best applied to the art of war; currently we are lacking this 'escaping one' from what we know about the Four Big Bandits' plot. If we could find this precious one, then the enemy's movement will be in place. Everything becomes reasonable and fair! His granny, what in the world is this precious 'escaping one'?"

Knitted his brows, Xu Ziling said, "If that guy and the spy were sent by the Four Big Bandits, they would hatch their plots in the dark; there is no reason for them to attack with clear saber and clear spear like this. With regard to the Ranch's topology, coordinated offensive from inside and outside won't do much good either."

Severely shaken, Kou Zhong said, "I get it!"

"You get what?" Xu Ziling happily asked.

"This must be the 'luring the tiger from its mountain' stratagem," Kou Zhong said, "The wine lover's heart is not in the cup, but on my sweetheart who does not love me, Li Xiuning."

Xu Ziling's tiger eyes flashed brightly, "You are right," he nodded, "Because she saw Li Xiuning's arrival during the day, the spy reported it to the outside ghost; the outside ghost then left sneakily. From this, we should know that this matter is related to the sweetheart in your dreams."

A bright murderous intent appeared on Kou Zhong's eyes; he snorted coldly and said, "The Four Big Bandits really don't know what they are getting into, unexpectedly they have the guts to target Xiuning. Uh! Not right! What benefit could they gain by offending the Li Clan?"

"The benefits might be in many aspects," Xu Ziling analyzed, "For instance, breaking the good relation between the Ranch and Li Clan; or perhaps generous rewards or support from Li Clan's enemies, and so on. Has your brain been dulled by Li Xiuning?"

Kou Zhong embarrassedly replied, "Maybe a bit confused; but what can we do now?"

Xu Ziling said, "If I were the character inciting the Four Big Bandits behind the scene, naturally one alive Princess is more useful than one fragrant, worn-out jade, perished Princess."

Lowering his voice, Kou Zhong said, "Could it be that the man behind the scene is Li Mi?"

Xu Ziling replied, "Li Mi, Yang Shichong [sic], and Xue Ju are highest in the suspects list. Just imagine that on one hand the Four Big Bandits are dragging the Ranch's main force, on the other hand they are deploying their strongest martial art masters from the mountain area descending into the mountain city, with the spy providing support from the inside. Shall we tell Shang Xiuxun directly?"

"Who can tell how Shang Xiuxun would react?" Kou Zhong said, "Better leave it unsaid. Let us find the spy first, and then we'll meet the incoming enemies head-on."

Xu Ziling shook his head and said, “You’ll be in charge of the inside, I’ll concentrate on the outside. Only then will we have the golden opportunity of destroying the Four Big Bandits for a thousand years.”

Kou Zhong jumped in fright, “Can we do it the other way around? Let me take care of those four thieves’ heads.”

“The one in charge of the inside must work closely with Li Xiuning,” Xu Ziling countered, “Only you deserve it.”

With a pained expression Kou Zhong said, “Have a pity on me, this kid who lost his love!”

Xu Ziling laughed involuntarily, “Didn’t you want me to pursue Shang Xiuxun? Maybe this is an opportunity. When someday she realizes how much effort I spend on her behalf, perhaps she will be touched and will give herself to marry me!”

Naturally Kou Zhong knew that he was just joking and teasing him, but he also knew that there was no room for discussion. Gnashing his teeth, he said, “And you still call yourself my good Xiongdi? It’s so unfair that you trick me into the trap.”

Xu Ziling roared in laughter and said, “I am enabling Zhong Shao to display your prowess both on the battlefield of the heart and the battlefield of life and death; you ought to be grateful to me. Come on!”

Kou Zhong was stunned, “Where?” he asked.

Letting out a natural and unrestrained laugh, Xu Ziling said, “Why, to see our facilitator behind the scenes of course!”

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After listening to the entire matter to the end, Lu Miaozi looked at the two boys up and down for half a day, sizing them up. And then rising to his full

height, he walked over to a bookshelf, and stretched out his hand inside to operate some sort of mechanism.

‘Creak! Creak!’ A stone slab, about three chi by three chi square in the middle of the hall caved in, to become the topmost step of a series of steps leading down; it was indeed astonishing to behold.

This was the very first time that the two boys saw such an elaborate mechanism with their own eyes; they were dumbstruck.

“Get down!” Lu Miaozi ordered, and took the lead going down the stone steps.

The two boys excitedly followed him down the two-zhang deep flight of stairs.

At the bottom was a spacious cellar about three-zhang square. On one side were two big wooden crates, on another side ten elaborate wooden cases were arranged on small tables along the wall.

Hanging from the wall on all four sides were seven, eight kinds of strange-looking things that might be weapons.

Surprisingly enough, the air in the cellar was only slightly more stuffy than the room upstairs; evidently the room had an adequate ventilation system.

Lu Miaozi took a case from one the small tables and handed it over to Kou Zhong, saying, “If you really want to get the ‘Duke Yang’s Treasure’, you must read and study this book.”

Kou Zhong received the case and took a look. Carved on the surface of the case was ‘Mechanism Study’, three large characters [ji guan xue]. Greatly delighted, he said, “Mister really knows what’s in this kid’s heart.”

Lu Miaozi took three other cases at once and handed them to Xu Ziling; smiling wryly, he said, “After I am dead, you may open the cases and browse through what’s inside. Otherwise, if you tell me that after reading through one time you already understand it completely, I won’t die with closed eyes. Ha!”

Xu Ziling smiled sheepishly and looked down to read. Turned out they were the 'Astronomy' [lit. Heavenly Star Study], 'Mathematics', and 'Architecture', three books.

Pointing to the two cases with characters 'Military Strategy' and 'Geography' carved on them, Kou Zhong said, "Those two cases will also be very useful to me."

Absent-mindedly, Lu Miaozi said, "Take it! Who told me to have such fate as meeting with you!"

Without any trace of politeness Kou Zhong took the wooden case. Were it not for Xu Ziling stopping him with his eyes, he might have opened the case and looked at the books inside.

Lu Miaozi walked over toward one of the big crates and plopped himself down. He patted the wooden crate, making a 'Peng! Peng!' sound, and with a wistful look on his face he said, "These are the gadgets I created thirty years ago. While wandering destitute in Jianghu for many years, they had made me countless glistening yellow gold. And now what's left in the box are things I do not have the heart to sell. After I die, whatever you can use you may take away, but leave the rest to accompany me buried in this room!"

Pointing to an iron-rod sticking out from the corner, he said, "If you use your power to pull the iron rod down, this room will close in ten breaths, and nobody will be able to open it. Moreover, this room will descent ten more zhang, and will be my An Le Wo [reminder: Comfort Zone, the name of his house] after I die."

Kou Zhong sighed and said, "Mr. Lu's reputation is indeed well-deserved; merely this kind of brilliant construction and mechanism is enough to earn you the title of number one master craftsman since times immemorial."

Lu Miaozi sobbed while shaking his head; with such an unbearable sorrow he said, "Life is like a dream, in just a snap of the fingers, we will return to dust, leaving only intertwining disgrace and regret. If I had the chance to start all over again, I would not have been interested in these playthings that make people

addicted.”

And then, pointing to another chest he said, “In there you will find ten exquisitely made masks, which can make you change shape in a single shake and become another person. It was most convenient when I roamed the Jianghu. I guarantee that nobody can see through it. Tonight you can put the masks to good use.”

The two boys were greatly delighted, and were very excited as well.

Lu Miaozi seriously said, “No matter how exquisite and ingenious the device is, in the end it is still minor art. Relying on it opposite to cultivating upper-class martial art, it is really harmful and not beneficial; therefore, I do not encourage you to use them. These ten masks are the exception.”

Kou Zhong was emotionally moved, “Mister’s lesson is very good,” he said, “Just now I had greedy thought to find a way to transport everything out, but now of course I do not dare to disobey Mister’s instruction!”

Lu Miaozi fixed his gaze on him for a moment. He sighed and said, “Now I like you a little bit.”

Kou Zhong was stunned, “Turns out Mister did not have favorable impression toward me all along,” he said.

Lu Miaozi shook his head and said, “It’s not like that; it’s because I am quite proficient in the art of looking at people’s countenance. I noticed that your eyebrows rose up and your eyes sharp, your nose’s energetic look straight through your face and it is pointy; evidently you have great ambitions and not afraid to take a risk out of desperation. The good aspect is that you are the type of hero people of all ages admire. The bad aspect is that you are the type of dominating hegemon. Therefore, I always have thirty-percent wariness toward you.”

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, “Since Mister is adept in looking at people’s countenance, can’t you see that I do have good and honest heart?”

Xu Ziling blurted out laughing and said, “Such sickening words and yet it came out of your mouth; from this it can be clearly seen that your goodness is limited!”

Lu Miaozi also laughed involuntarily. Standing up, he took a pair of steel claws from a wall nearby, and gave each person one, saying, “This is a pair of ‘Flying Divine Escape’ [fei tian shen dun, lit. fly to heaven divine escape]. In those days I relied on these treasures to escape Zhu Yuyan’s hunt. They can be used separately, can catch and bore through any object; naturally only those with strong martial art skill can operate them easily. The steel ring on their tails can even extend as long as ten zhang of rare, precious ice silkworm thread. With your true qi, you can use the steel claw as nimbly as your hands, the silk thread can be long or short, but today I am not in the mood to elaborate, you must research it yourself!”

The two boys were pleased beyond their expectations; they expressed their gratitude promptly.

Lu Miaozi said, “You may leave the books here. After each of you pick your mask, you may take ‘Flying Divine Escape’ claws and join the excitement. Remember to come back here to recount to me the course of events you subdue the enemies and seize the victory.”

After exhaling a mouthful of air, he added, “I don’t know if it was the Li Clan’s good fortune or the Four Big Bandits’ lousy luck that they unexpectedly provoked you, these two guys.”

END OF BOOK 9

Book 10 Chapter 1 – Separate Deployment

The atmosphere at the Flying Horse Ranch tensed up.

The sentry stations and lookout towers, which were normally unguarded, were now tightly guarded. All the able-bodied men in the entire Ranch marched out of the mountain city batch by batch, and reassembled at the pasture ready to head for the battlefield.

As soon as Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling slipped back into their room, before they even had any chance to sit down, Lan Gu already came and ordered them, “Changzhu’s strict order: unless under specific assignment, Inner Castle people are to stay in their respective courtyards. Violator will be dealt with in accordance with the house rules. Are you clear?”

Leaning by the door, Kou Zhong said to Lan Gu, who was standing outside the door, “We are at war or not, everybody still has to eat; therefore, Lan Gu came to deliver this strict order to us, isn’t it superfluous?”

Lan Gu did not expect that Kou Zhong would not give her any face at all, his expression did not show any concern for his superior; she was so angry that her thin face turned green as she said, “I am in charge in this village courtyard. If I want you two to stay here then you are not allowed to take one step out of the door; otherwise, don’t blame me for being discourteous.”

Giggling, Kou Zhong said, “Lan Gu, calm down. Just now the Housekeeper reported to Changzhu that the vanguard of Four Big Bandits’ allied armies appears in the vicinity; we were just talking with Changzhu about our living arrangement.”

Turning his head toward Xu Ziling, who was sitting in a chair, covering his mouth and snickering, he called out, “Xiao Jing’s memory is better than mine; what did Changzhu say again?”

Xu Ziling promptly put up a serious expression, and said flatly, “Changzhu told us not to worry. She ordered us to make more pastries to entertain Princess Ning and her entourage, and we must not be careless, because our Ranch’s grand reputation in negotiation and troops deployment depends on it.”

Lan Gu was tongue-tied, because she remembered that she has not made any new arrangement for their lodging; her anger subsided considerably. “Since you have Changzhu’s order, why are you still here?” she spoke haltingly.

The two boys thanked the Heaven in their hearts, and quickly slipped out toward the firewood shed.

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Dusk.

Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling finished making pastries, put them in brocade box, and holding it with both hands they headed toward the Green Ring Courtyard where Li Xiuning stayed. Along the way they encountered several patrolling troops, but after some explanations, they did not have any trouble.

Green Ring Courtyard was a standalone courtyard surrounded by high walls on all four sides. The right side of the middle of the courtyard was dancing trees; the scenery was serene and seemed to be detached from the outside world.

The most distinguishing feature of this courtyard was that outside the entrance, there was a rock garden approximately ten zhang in diameter, the pouring water from which form a pond underneath with goldfish in it. There was also a long nine-bend bridge, more than ten zhang long, connecting this garden and the middle courtyard.

The long bridge weaved left and right among the rocks, much like a maze, and in the middle there was even a hexagonal pavilion; the layout was ingenious,

making people sighed in admiration.

Xu Ziling noticed that Kou Zhong was silent the entire trip; he knew the conflict in Kou Zhong's heart because of Li Xiuning, yet he also knew that in this kind of matter, nobody can lend a helping hand; therefore, he could only sigh in his heart.

Inside the hexagonal pavilion sat two fully armed men; looking at their clothes, the two boys knew that these men were part of Li Xiuning's personal guards. Seeing the two boys, the two men asked in surprise, "Anything wrong?"

Kou Zhong explained the purpose of their visit. One of the men said in relief, "Just give it to us!"

Kou Zhong had already anticipated that this would happen; he smiled and said, "Earlier this morning, Princess Xiuning came to tour the kitchen, and instructed us, Xiao Ren, that after we make the pastries, she wanted us to explain how to make it. Would two Daye please make a report inside?"

The guard frowned and said, "Princess is receiving guests, plus this is not an urgent matter. We must report it first and see whether Princess can receive you or not later on. It would be better if you just give that thing to us."

Without much choice the two boys put the pastries down, turned around and left.

Once they were out the guards' vision, Xu Ziling wondered, "Who might be Li Xiuning's guests?"

Kou Zhong smiled wryly and said, "I am sure they are Ranch people; for her, they are guests. Oh! Not good!"

The two boys remembered the spy at the same time.

Xu Ziling made a prompt decision, "We will immediately split up; remember to go back first to fetch your Moon in the Well."

Kou Zhong pulled him back and said, “Outside, the enemy may attack and besiege us for ten days, half a month, the situation inside is more critical, how could you slip out and have fun this soon and leave me to suffer in here alone?”

Xu Ziling pushed him back and said, “If we are acting together, it will be easier for others to suspect us. Don’t forget that body shape and height can’t be changed. Besides, we want to train ourselves to assume personal responsibility to better prepare ourselves for the future. Do you understand?”

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Kou Zhong and Xu Ziling changed into the night-walker outfits that Lu Miaozi supplied them earlier. After putting on the masks, they immediately changed into two completely different persons that they nearly could not recognize each other.

Xu Ziling turned into a thirty-something rough-looking man, with rough bronze face, full of pockmarks, plus saber scar about three cun long on his right cheek; a Jianghu big-bandit, who was used to kill and burn, persona. His face matched well with his tall and straight, sturdy built; so that his entire person exuded an indescribable coarse and wild aura.

Kou Zhong’s appearance was even weirder. Not only he had an aquiline nose, which was not too pleasant to look at, his face was covered in full beard; an arrogant, violent, tyrannical and wild persona. His age looked to be about ten years older than Xu Ziling’s new persona.

The two boys took turn looking into the copper mirror and both doubled-up in laughter.

Kou Zhong patted Xu Ziling’s shoulder and said, “Tonight we, the Two Eccentrics of Yangzhou, are deployed separately, to turn his mother’s heaven and earth upside down.” [Translator’s note: just want the readers to know that the same character (怪) was translated as ‘freaks’ in Eagle Shooting Hero (as in ‘Seven Freaks of Jiangnan’), but I feel that in this context the two boys were not exactly ‘freaks’.]

Xu Ziling nodded and said, "If anybody finds out that we are not here and inquire later, we must say that we went to Mr. Lu to learn his skill; are you clear?"

Hanging the Moon in the Well on his back, Kou Zhong replied, "In that case, we ought to rendezvous at Lu Miaozi's place first to be absolutely safe. Come! The guy who does not have any yiqi [spirit of loyalty, code of brotherhood]!"

They jumped out the window.

Xu Ziling followed closely behind Kou Zhong, unleashing their night-walk skill, darting like a rabbit, crouching like a heron, subsequently passing several rows of buildings, until they finally reached a two-story building and crouched on its roof. "Why did you say I have no yiqi?" he whispered.

Staring at the general direction of the Green Ring Courtyard where Li Xiuning stayed, Kou Zhong said hatefully, "You said you have yiqi? The fun things you hogged for yourself, leaving me in here eating the northwest wind, waiting for the enemy to execute their plot like an idiot."

At first Xu Ziling was smiling, but then he could not help laughing. "Who told you to become that romantic? The hero rescues the beauty; it's yours exclusively. Remember to regroup at Mr. Lu's place before daybreak. Please behave! Now if you'll excuse me, Xiaodi is not able to accompany you!"

Raising his arms, like a lightning he soared into the night sky in the direction of the Castle's wall.

Watching Xu Ziling disappearing into the distant darkness, Kou Zhong sighed helplessly and slid down onto a smaller building. With movements like a swimming fish, his ghost-like figure floated toward the Green Ring Courtyard.

The vortex of qi within his body grew and multiplied endlessly, making him appeared to have unlimited supply of explosive power. Evading several teams of patrolling guards, traversing the rock garden, he reached the foot of the courtyard wall.

Kou Zhong focused his mind and sent his power to his ears. Immediately an incomparably moving world of audio descended into his ears. The swimming fish moving their tails in the pond under the forest of rocks, the dancing leaves in the evening breeze, even any noise within the ten zhang radius around him: the breathing, the coughing; nothing escaped his eardrums. So much so that he startled himself, surprised that he had become more and more formidable.

If he could hide within the central zone of the Green Ring Courtyard, wouldn't he be able to use his pair of ears to listen to most of what's happening within the Courtyard?

But of course it would not be easy. Not only was Li Xiuning herself a martial art master within the Li Clan, her intelligent was also surpassed others. Under the current circumstances, she would have deployed her men to form a tight perimeter, which would prevent the enemy from breaking in.

And then there were Li Gang and Dou Wei who came with her; both were not easy to deal with. Once a misunderstanding arose, things could go bad real fast.

Thinking to this point, since he already had a good grasp of the situation on the other side of the wall, he drafted a plan to infiltrate the Courtyard.

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Xu Ziling shot toward the city wall like an arrow, the 'divine escape' in his hand shot out, controlled by his internal power, noiselessly grabbing the top of the wall in between two lookout towers, and then at the dead end, out of the line of sight of the guards, he flipped over the wall, and then after loosening up the divine escape, again he noiselessly flipped over the fifteen-zhang city wall, and stuck himself to the wall he slid down to the ground.

Taking advantage while the guards' attention was focused on the pasture outside the city, he darted along the foot of the wall toward a safe place where the river was running along the city wall.

The stars filled the sky, but the moon was hazy; suddenly a strange feeling welled-up in his heart.

A strong feeling of loneliness overwhelmed his heart, as if he was entering an isolated world, where he no longer related to anybody else.

The divine escape shot out again, grabbing a large rock on the opposite bank of the river. The vortex of power concentrated at the yongquan acupoint on his right foot, enabling him to shoot to the other side almost parallel to the water surface, greatly reducing the chance of being detected.

Without even stopping he entered a sparse forest and ran toward the eastern gorge entrance.

He had neither a plan nor confidence that he would be able to avoid detection from the guards at the eastern gorge entrance, because by using the 'flying divine escape', he could easily climb over the steep and dangerous cliff to get to the battlefield outside.

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Kou Zhong leaped over the wall, the divine escape in his hand shot out like lightning, the claw traversed an eight-zhang of empty space and caught the eaves of the building nearby, propelling him toward the roof, where he quickly ducked into the darkness.

After listening carefully and making sure he clearly grasped the layout of his surroundings, he slipped down to the ground. Halting and darting, he passed through a small garden and flitted across three buildings, and finally hid under a flowering shrub.

Sweeping his eyes around, Kou Zhong found out that he was in right in the heart of the garden, with flowers and trees, a pond, rockery and a pavilion around him; an elegant and serene environment.

All the buildings surrounding the garden were brightly lit, and he was able to faintly hear voices from those buildings.

Focusing his heart and mind, Kou Zhong listened carefully. Immediately a

woman's voice coming from the building to his left caught his attention.

Just by hearing her voice Kou Zhong immediately recognized that this was the woman whom he trailed secretly the other night; the spy.

Deliberately lowering her voice, she said, "Princess Ning ought to understand by now, that since Changzhu knows Li Tianfan and is going to have confidential meeting with him in the near future, she is very likely to provide Li Mi with war-horses and equipment. Although Housekeeper and most of the Managers are in strong opposition, their urging is in vain."

Kou Zhong shivered in fear; he had a faint feeling that this conspiracy is somehow related to Li Mi. Because no matter what happened to Li Xiuning, the Li Clan would naturally suspect that the root cause was the collusion between Shang Xiuxun and Li Mi.

If Li Tianfan was Li Mi's son, then he must also be Song Yuzhi's fiancé.

"This is serious," Li Gang's voice was heard, "I wonder if your honorable husband is aware of Madam's visit this time?"

Full of confidence, the woman replied, "Of course, it was Laoye who implored Yuan'er to seize this opportunity to come and discuss this matter with you, with the hope that our relationship with your honorable Clan will not be damaged just because Changzhu is unable to think straight."

Kou Zhong praised her in his heart; under these no-conflict circumstances, she was able to make Li Xiuning's side at least have some misgivings.

Dou Wei's deep and heroic voice was heard, "This is really strange, because as far as we know, Li Mi is the main culprit who secretly supporting the Four Big Bandits in disrupting the South; why would the Four Big Bandits come to attack the Ranch?"

The woman named Yuan'er calmly replied, "Laoye has already analyzed this matter; it may be a deliberate diversion. That's why he repeatedly urged Yuan'er

to contact you as soon as possible, because most likely this is Changzhu's first muddleheaded action under Li Tianfan's instigation."

"Princess Ning," Dou Wei said, "No matter what, we must immediately strengthen our defense."

"He who comes is surely ill-intentioned, no-one well-meaning will come," Li Xiuning replied indifferently, "If this matter is really driven by Xun Jie [elder sister], she knows our strength like the back of her hand; we can't guard against her even if we want to."

Hearing her voice, there were both love and hatred in Kou Zhong's heart. The beauty was able to display such cool-headedness under these circumstances, no wonder the Li Clan entrusted the heavy responsibility of negotiating with Shang Xiuxun to her.

Li Xiuning went on, "Is it possible for Yuan Jie to notify Da Zongguan [big chief manager] to have a confidential discussion with us?"

Kou Zhong cheered inwardly; if Li Xiuning saw Shang Zhen, Yuan'er cheap trick would be exposed immediately.

To his surprise, however, Yuan'er readily agreed; she also said, "Yuan'er will immediately dispatch a messenger to notify Laoye. He is currently in charge of the eastern gorge defense; unless there is a military emergency, there shouldn't be any problem."

And then Yuan'er took her leave, Li Xiuning, three people personally sent her off.

Kou Zhong has more or less understood Yuan'er's plot. He pondered over whether he should seize this opportunity to hide inside Li Xiuning's personal chamber, waiting for her return, and then he could ... hey! Thinking to this point, his heart was burning; forgetting everything else, he flashed in.

Xu Ziling stood on top of a peak above the steep cliff, overlooking the plain extending into the distance outside the mouth of the western gorge.

Under this hazy moonlight and star-filled night sky, the winding mountains and rivers appeared to unfold from under his feet.

Suddenly Xu Ziling understood Kou Zhong's desire for supremacy over the world.

It was the feeling of sovereignty over the world, the feeling of dominion over the mother earth.

Someone Kou Zhong's character would never take second place to anybody.

He, Xu Ziling, would not be willing to accept inferior status either, but what he was after was free and easy, unfettered way of life.

No one can tie him down.

Including Kou Zhong.

After helping Kou Zhong getting the 'Duke Yang's Treasure', he would have accomplished his responsibility as a good brother. The meritorious deed completed, he could retire.

At the end of his eyesight, he saw a small hill about three li southwest of the city gate tower at the mouth of the gorge, where human figures were moving about; by his estimate there were at least several hundred people going down the slope of the hill, pouring into the vast prairie between the small hill and the mouth of the gorge. It appeared that these people were pushing toward the Ranch.

About five li to the northwest, there was a winding river with nine bends and ten turns traversing the prairie toward the back of that small hill, with dense forest on both sides, from where came the neighs of the horses hidden over there.

Between these two places, there was a small village built by the river, but he did not see the least bit of lights, neither did he hear any sound of dogs or chicken; obviously all the villagers have fled early on.

On this side of the mouth of the gorge, the Flying Horse Ranch's warriors also marched out of the city gate tower, with the imposing manner of soldiers ready for war. Just by looking at the two sides' movements, he knew that hard battle was inevitable.

Xu Ziling's blood was boiling. Like a big bird he soared into the air and jumped down the cliff.

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Kou Zhong flitted up toward the roof, and immediately crouched down motionless.

Dou Wei's voice was heard again, "Does Princess think that that Yuan'er is trustworthy?"

Li Xiuning sighed and said, "How could Shang Xiuxun be that kind of despicable scumbag? But we definitely must be on guard; we'll decide what to do after we talk with Shang Zhen. Oh! Is there a way for us to examine Yuan'er's background?"

Li Gang said, "For the time being, we have no way ..." He suddenly stopped speaking.

While Kou Zhong was pondering why, a clear and bright male voice came from the eaves of the opposite building, "Friend, you broke into the Green Ring Courtyard at night; may I ask what brings you here?"

Kou Zhong jumped in fright. Granted that his attention was focused at eavesdropping Li Xiuning's party discussion, but the other side was able to come this close him so quietly; evidently he was a martial art master.

And the voice sounded a bit familiar.

When he looked up to see, to his astonishment, it was Li Xiuning's lover, Chai Shao.

Book 10 Chapter 2 – Debut Of The Divine Skill

Leaving the gorge area, Xu Ziling raised his qi to speed along among the trees, while from time to time shooting the divine escape to alter his angle and direction, as well as to increase his speed, sort of like a kid who had just received a fun new toy, which he enjoyed and loved very much that he could not bear to let it go.

He felt as if the Flying Divine Escape has become a part of his body. The nimble and free-flowing true qi was the ingenious link between he and the divine escape, enabling him to manipulate it like ‘what the heart wishes, the hand accomplishes’.

It was a little bit like using a long whip; he was even able to use the divine escape to forge ahead in a roundabout way [orig. going round the curves and skirting the corners], so that he was able to go through the forest like a ghost, without any obstruction at all.

In fact, he was almost ‘flying’ freely like a hawk; whenever his toes pushed on the tree trunk or horizontal branches, he would get enough force to propel him forward, so that he was flying across the woods without his feet ever touching the ground. This kind of joyous feeling was indeed the most fresh and exciting experience he ever felt in his entire life. The most wonderful thing was that because he was using the spiraling power, the divine escape automatically spun as it flew toward the target, so that not only it shot faster, the strength also increased tremendously as well.

Right this moment, the wind-borne sound of battle was starting to enter his ears, and it was growing more intense by the minute.

Recalling that the Four Big Bandits killed and burned everywhere, making the common people live in utter misery, Xu Ziling could not stop righteous indignation from filling his heart, so he flew toward the sound of the fighting at his top speed.

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By the time Kou Zhong slid down to the ground, sound of the wind sprang up everywhere; he already fell into a heavy siege.

Dou Wei and Li Gang blocked his escape route, while fast as lightning Li Xiuning also arrived; together with the two men they formed a triangle, with Kou Zhong in the middle.

While Kou Zhong was groaning inwardly, Chai Shao landed by Li Xiuning's side. Laughing proudly, he said, "Friend came here easy; if you are able to leave easy, will our Li Family have any face to see our Jianghu friends?"

If Chai Shao was not present, Kou Zhong would have simply revealed his identity and explained the purpose of his visit, and this matter could be resolved. But now that he came face-to-face with his rival in love, unexpectedly an indescribable fire rose up in his heart, no matter what he refused to get away from this situation in such a stupid and cowardly way.

It's just that he was caught off guard because he never expected that Chai Shao might hide to protect Li Xiuning in secret.

Sound of the wind sprang up everywhere, more than a dozen Li Xiuning's personal guards showed themselves up the parapets and between the building and the trees, forming a ring around him so tight that not one drop of water could trickle through. Most had a bow or a crossbow in their hands.

Li Xiuning's sword was pointing to the vital acupoint on his chest, bursts of chilling sword qi were pressing on him. She spoke coldly, "Which side does Sire represent?"

'Qiang!'

It was only now did Chai Shao pulled a pair of arm-protector steel truncheon, one long, one short, from his back. The long one was approximately three chi, the short one was about a chi and a half; both were glittering gold, extremely dazzling to the eyes.

He was moving in such a confident and at ease way, which was pleasant to look at, but at the same time his imposing manner was quite intimidating. Somehow, this has aroused Kou Zhong's eager-to-win, striving-to-excel, strange state of mind even more.

Dou Wei was wielding a heavy steel staff, which he held horizontally in front of his chest, practically cutting off Kou Zhong's rear right side's escape path, making people felt like wherever he was going to run to, he would have had to stake everything he had.

Li Gang was armed with a pair of sword, but the degree of sharpness of his sword qi was a notch below that of Li Xiuning's; hence it could be said that among the four people besieging Kou Zhong, his martial art was the weakest.

Before they fought, Kou Zhong was already certain that Chai Shao's martial art was superior to Li Xiuning's, because as soon as he appeared, the besieging net's pressure immediately multiplied several folds, so that Kou Zhong did not dare to rashly run away.

Abruptly sucking in a mouthful of true qi, Kou Zhong pressed down the anxiety in his heart, returning to the moon-in-the-well placid condition. Using the technique taught by Lu Miaozi, he applied his internal energy to tighten up his vocal cords, so that his laughter became sharp and shrill, "This time I came blindly here, indeed there is something I'd like to tell you. Would Princess Ning be interested to hear?"

As Li Xiuning's eyes met his, her heart was suddenly filled with a familiar feeling. "Have we met before?" she asked in astonishment.

Letting out a cold snort Chai Shao said, "If Sire is willing to throw your weapon down and have your hands tied, we would listen to whatever it is you have to

say.”

Remembering Chai Shao’s arrogant manners toward him and Xu Ziling with arrogance the other day, and how his expression showed contempt as he looked at the two boys, Kou Zhong’s anger flared.

Especially now that he was standing side-by-side with Li Xiuning in an intimate manner, like they were a couple of ‘talented man and beautiful woman’, a match made in heaven, it would be strange indeed if Kou Zhong’s heart was not filled with hatred out of jealousy.

He was even considering going all-out, breaking with siege with all his strength, no longer care about Li Xiuning’s affair, to see what kind of ability this kid had that he dared to protect Li Xiuning.

Li Gang spoke in heavy voice, “If friend is unwilling to have your hands tied and waiting to be captured, don’t blame the saber and sword for not having any eyes.”

Kou Zhong sighed and said slowly, “I only want to say something, and then I’ll leave immediately. Would Princess Ning step aside and talk to me?”

Dou Wei laughed toward the other men and said, “This guy thinks that we are just the same as him, an idiot!”

Hearing that, Li Xiuning and Chai Shao looked at each other and laughed.

Originally Kou Zhong was going to persuade using all possible arguments to uncover Yuan’er’s conspiracy, but seeing Li Xiuning and Chai Shao looking at each other with lovey-dovey eyes, instantly he threw this thought at the back of his head. Worse yet, he saw Li Xiuning’s limpid-autumn-water like touching beautiful eyes cast a sincere look full of deep passion; immediately he had a hard-to-understand feeling as if he was being cheated.

‘Ring!’

As the Moon in the Well left its scabbard, Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, "If you want to fight, then let's fight! But don't you ever regret it!"

Li Xiuning and the others immediately felt his forceful, overbearing saber qi; hastily they hastened their own true qi to resist.

Chai Shao asked in surprise, "Friend's skill is out of the ordinary; definitely you are not a nobody in Jianghu. Why until now still insist on being sneaky by not daring to reveal your name and surname?"

Kou Zhong's sharp gaze fell on Li Xiuning's pretty face, which wound around his dreams and pulled away his soul; he said indifferently, "Isn't Princess Ning's future husband being superfluous? If I can reveal my name and surname, wouldn't I already say it early on?"

The four people's countenance changed greatly.

It should be noted that presently Chai Shao's identity was kept a secret, because he was tasked to protect Li Xiuning in secret. If Shang Xiuxun found out, the relationship between the two sides would immediately turn awkward.

However, this was not an unresolved matter, they could always explain. The frightening thing was if Kou Zhong were Li Mi's man, it would mean that their real strength has been exposed to the enemy.

A murderous aura flitted across Li Xiuning's pretty eyes; she said coldly, "How do you know his identity?"

Actually, it was tantamount to admitting to Kou Zhong that Chai Shao was her future husband. Although Kou Zhong was already aware of this fact, he still felt as if the pit of his stomach was struck by a thunder, making him so angry that he nearly vomited blood.

Smiling wryly, he said, "There are a lot of things in this world that are difficult to explain. But I am definitely not related to either Li Mi or the Ranch. If Princess can be sensible and agree to have an earnest talk with me, I can guarantee a

valuable information in return, and then I will immediately leave.”

Chai Shao shook his pair of long and short arm-protector steel truncheon; murderous aura immediately pervaded the air. Laughing casually, he said, “Do you think you can leave that easy? If you don’t throw down your saber and surrender immediately, you’ll see real trouble under my hands!”

Dou Wei, who was standing at Kou Zhong’s side, also shouted, “Since you have the guts to come, don’t be gutless by wanting to run away.”

Kou Zhong sighed inwardly; if this moment he changed his mind and introduced himself, it would appear that he was afraid of Chai Shao, which, even if he had to be killed, he would never do. Thereupon he nodded and said, “Sword and saber indeed don’t have eyes. Gentlemen, please be careful.”

With a sudden gust of wind Dou Wei’s heavy staff smashed toward Kou Zhong’s head from behind, practically pulling open the curtain of battle.

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Xu Ziling flew through the sparse forest, and saw outside the forest, torch flames at the prairie illuminate the sky. A group of more than a hundred thieves wearing red band on their heads was besieging a group of twenty or so Ranch’s warriors in close combat. Surprisingly he recognized one of the warriors as Luo Fang.

On the hilltop at his left, a dozen or so men were standing; other than one man, who presumably was the leader, the rest were wearing red band on their heads, so they were very easy to recognize.

Obviously Luo Fang and his men had fallen into disadvantageous position; they fought strenuously in circular formation. In the middle of the circle, seven or eight men were either lying on their backs or on their stomachs; apparently they had received injury and thus lost their strength to continue fighting.

On the thieves’ side, there were quite a number of casualties as well; it was indeed an intense battle.

Xu Ziling had no time to think why Luo Fang and his men fell into such perilous situation. He soared to the air and threw himself in the middle of the thieves' formation. Before his feet even touched the ground, two men were kicked and died on the spot.

With this sudden change, while the thieves were still unclear of what happened, four more men received his punches and died.

Whether it was a kick or a punch, Xu Ziling's vortex of hot power shot out freely. The strangest thing was that his victims were not thrown back; rather, they suddenly dropped down to the ground, their faces did not even show any bruise.

Two enemies rushed in from the left side, the flickering sabers in their hands matched their loud shout and violent hiss, as they rapidly came to attack.

Like a ghost Xu Ziling darted in between the two, his body flashed, his shoulders subsequently slammed onto the two. This time, learning from experience, he was using hard, ferocious force. The two men's shoulder bones shattered immediately, the sabers in their hands were spun around and flung to the side, their bodies were thrown toward a dozen or so thief troops that were rushing toward Xu Ziling, so that the enemy ranks were immediately tumbling down in confusion.

By this time, he was only about twenty paces or so from Luo Fang and his men. One after another the nearby thieves left Luo Fang and the others to charge toward Xu Ziling.

Xu Ziling sent out a punch across an empty air, the violent vortex of hot energy shot straight toward a man who seemed to be the leader of those dozen or so men charging toward him.

'Bang!'

As if he was swept away by a storm or a gigantic wave, his entire body were lifted off the ground, and then like a kite with cut string he crashed onto two of

his companions behind him. The three men rolled on the ground like a gourd, their muscles and bones shattered.

The rest of the men had never seen such a powerful long-distance punch like this; they were scared and flew away in all directions.

With Xu Ziling diverted most of the enemy, Luo Fang and his men's momentum was greatly boosted; they charged forward that the opponents suffered a crushing defeat, while trying to move toward Xu Ziling.

Another group of about forty enemies came to attack Xu Ziling, giving him an enormous pressure. Yet Xu Ziling was by no means cowardly and panicking; his spirit has entered the 'no-victory, no-defeat', the 'still-water' realm.

Amazing things happened.

All of a sudden, he was able to clearly grasp the situation of the entire battlefield.

That is not to say that he knew every little detail of everything happening; rather, by means of different levels of his vision and hearing, he was able to grasp the variation of what's true and what's false in his surrounding, both near and far, thereby he could determine his advance and retreat.

It was an unprecedented feeling.

Prior to this, he could only deal with the most critical thing in front of him. But now, even though the enemies were swarming at him from all directions, his perception was extended beyond the crisis he was facing. Not only was he aware that the enemies on the hill were advancing toward him, he was also aware that Luo Fang and his men had again fallen into heavy siege of the regrouping enemies after his attack.

Xu Ziling let out a long whistle and soared into the air. When he landed, it was precisely by Luo Fang's side, while at the same time he formed a saber with his hand, and fast as lightning swept it across the flashing sabers of the thieves, who

were raining their attack toward Luo Fang and his men.

The man did not even have any chance to evade, so forget about turning back the saber to block. Looking helplessly he was cut by the palm saber at his chest, was thrown back and died.

With the same manner Xu Ziling subsequently stepped a dozen times around, immediately the opposite side suffered a crushing defeat and was thrown into a mess.

Xu Ziling was able to clearly sense the strong or weak point of every single one of the enemy's attack, his countermeasure matched their situation perfectly.

It was a very subtle feeling.

Just like the limpid water in the well that can reflect anything. On the surface, the opponents in front of him appeared to carry torrential momentum, but in his eyes, there were gaps and flaws everywhere. Basically this situation did not even worth him using the Yijian Xinfu.

This moment a broadsword came sweeping across, carrying with it a fierce whistling noise; the saber qi was threatening, it was the fiercest saber Xu Ziling ever encountered since the battle began.

Xu Ziling cheered inwardly. His palm hacked down, it hit the blade of the opponent's saber, sending the vortex of hot energy toward the enemy. The saber wielder groaned miserably, the saber fell down, his mouth spurted out blood, he staggered and fell back.

Apparently this man had quite a status among the bunch of thieves; as the crowd saw that he could not take even one palm strike from Xu Ziling, they were terrified and followed him fleeing in all directions.

Xu Ziling forgot that he was in disguise; without thinking he came over to Luo Fang and asked in concern, "Are you all right?"

Luo Fang was astonished, "I am all right," he replied, "May I know En Gong's [benefactor] honorable surname and great given name? Your kindness in saving our lives, our Flying Horse Ranch will definitely pay you back."

Xu Ziling just realized his faux pas. This moment the bunch of thieves had run away one after the other, the Ranch's fighters came over, they all looked at him with grateful eyes.

Assuming a bold and uninhibited manner, Xu Ziling laughed aloud and said, "Rioting thieves and bandits, every single one deserved to be punished. As for my name and who I am, it is not even worth mentioning. It would be best for you to immediately return to your unit, I have not killed enough people."

With another long laugh he ran toward where the enemy's forces were concentrated.

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As Dou Wei's staff was smashing his head from the back, Chai Shao made his move at the same time. Like two streaks of lightning the long and short arm-protector steel truncheons separately shot toward Kou Zhong's face and chest. It was filled with murderous intention, bold and powerful to the extreme, and extremely ruthless. His qi power tightly covered the opponent, so that whether Kou Zhong wanted to strike back or run away, he would have to go all-out first to face this attack.

Although Li Gang was one step late in launching his attack, he also took an unfair advantage by attacking from the side. The pair of swords in his hands swept across Kou Zhong's neck and his waist, with incomparable ruthlessness; a move so vicious that people would find it difficult to associate his attack with his usual air of an elegant Confucian scholar.

Only Li Xiuning took a half step back. The tip of her sword was still exuding sword qi, to prevent Kou Zhong from breaking the siege in that direction, but she did not join the foray.

If it were the former Kou Zhong, this moment he would be at a loss to know

what to do. Even though he might not necessarily suffer immediate defeat, injury would be hard to avoid. Fortunately, after surviving near death experience with Wanwan, where he reaped profit from a disaster, he learned to develop the vortex of qi, which no one from ancient times had ever learned, his martial art took a step – which could not be imitated, forward, so that it was not just a case of ‘self-improvement by diligent study’.

This moment, just like swimming fish, he weaved in and out among the siege, and then brandishing his saber in ferocious hack. ‘Swish! Swish! Swish!’ three consecutive chops, yellow glow filled the air, unexpectedly he hacked Chai Shao’s two arm-protector steel truncheons and Dou Wei’s steel staff.

Chai Shao and Dou Wei’s hearts turned cold.

Originally they had ninety-percent confidence of their own moves, but under Kou Zhong’s fantastic shenfa, they felt as if the opponent was clearly in front of them, but suddenly he turned into a disembodied ghost so that they were completely off in trying to seize his position.

It was a very serious problem.

It should be noted that when martial art masters exchanged blows, they must constantly estimate changes and adjust their moves accordingly. On the surface it appeared to be a simple problem, but it really contained a myriad of knowledge.

Kou Zhong was able to fully use his fantastic shenfa within about three chi of space, so that the opponents could not correctly predict and determine his position. In other words, it was akin to suddenly lose their target; how could they not be in great shock? Immediately they were at a loss.

Under the flourishing yellow glow and the criss-crossing saber qi, Chai Shao and Dou Wei met Kou Zhong’s Moon in the Well head-on.

‘Dang! Dang! Dang!’ With three shocking explosions, like an astonishing cyclone of ice the unmatched fantastic vortex of qi flowed through the point of contact of the saber blade and their weapons, and burst into their bodies,

straight toward the bottom of their abdomens.

The two men had never expected Kou Zhong to be this formidable, their entire bodies, from head to toe, were severely shaken.

Chai Shao's power was still two notches above Dou Wei's; he only staggered two steps back before managing to steady his footing. With a stifled grunt the latter was jolted backward.

Seeing the unfavorable situation, Li Xiuning waved her delicate hand to create a sword pattern pressing down on Kou Zhong.

Kou Zhong opened his tiger-eyes wide open, flashes of lightning shot out. With unspeakable calmness he casually turned his saber backhandedly to pare between Li Gang's two swords, and then striking up followed by cutting down, 'Dang! Dang!' Li Gang was immediately routed, his pair of swords bounced up and down, so that his line of defense was wide open, while at the same time he felt the opponent's hard-to-resist vortex of qi burst in, straight toward his heart and spleen. His soul flew away and scattered, he ran away backward.

"Don't come!" Chai Shao shouted, stopping his own men, who were standing outside the arena, from entering the fray, while he flashed into Li Gang's position to mend the siege. He coordinated his double arm-protectors with Li Xiuning's offensive, his expression looked extremely heavy.

Such a formidable foe, he had never imagined it in advance.

Kou Zhong laughed aloud. Unexpectedly he bent his back and bumped himself against the retreating Dou Wei, not only to temporarily widened the distance so that it would be hard for Li Xiuning's sword force to reach him, Chai Shao's attack also fell on empty space.

Under this situation, if it were before the battle, Dou Wei would have brandished his staff to block, so that if Kou Zhong did not die, he would definitely suffer serious injury. But presently Dou Wei was making every effort to dissolve Kou Zhong's fantastic qi invading his channels, so that his current power was only about fifty-percent his usual strength, plus he was still overcoming the

backward momentum of his retreat earlier. Therefore, if he forced himself to fight, other than he did not have any confidence of breaking Kou Zhong's true qi protecting his body, if the opponent's back, which was brimming with vortex of qi, crashed onto him, how could he stay alive?

In great shock, Dou Wei did not dare show-off; he hastily sidestepped Kou Zhong's body.

Actually, Kou Zhong himself did not expect that in these several clashes, he was able to take the initiative and full control of the situation, so that advancing he could attack, retreating he could evade; he could not help feeling so pleased. "Stop!" he shouted.

Li Xiuning and Chai Shao were afraid he might take the opportunity to kill either Dou Wei or Li Gang; thereupon they followed his order and held their weapons.

'Qiang!'

Kou Zhong's saber went back to its scabbard, but he himself still carried the aura of an unsheathed saber, so that others did not dare to belittle him.

His gaze swept the crowd with his awe-inspiring might radiating all around; with his intimidating body shape and expression, which did not match his fake face's smiling expression, he spoke nonchalantly, "Gentlemen should have known that if I meant harm to the Princess, I would not need to hide the head and show the tail. That being the case, let us all sit down and drink some tea, and have a nice chat!"

None of Li Xiuning and her men was not stunned.

Book 10 Chapter 3 – You Hoodwink Me, I Cheat You

Xu Ziling squatted by a brook. He washed his hands first, and then scooped the water with his hands and delightedly drank two mouthful of fresh water.

The refreshing creek water poured into his throat, greatly rejuvenating his mind and spirit, while not too far away the sound of killing and the hard battle was still heard, and on the other side the hoof beats sounded like a distant rumbling of a thunder. But in that instant everything seemed to be detached from him.

The three cuts on his arm, left shoulder and right leg still hurt a little bit, but the cuts were more or less healed; they no longer bled.

In his mind he still remembered vividly how under the enemy's heavy siege he killed a lot of the enemy leaders. And then using the divine escape he easily got out of the siege by hanging from tree to tree.

The thieves' forces were clearly more than several thousand strong, plus their martial art masters were as numerous as clouds, so that the Ranch's fighters who met the enemy head-on were repeatedly caught in bitter struggle.

Right now, the only way he could help the Flying Horse Ranch to get out of this disaster was to find the location of the Four Big Bandits' main force first, and then utilizing guerilla warfare he would kill their Commander-in-Chief. In this way he would completely frustrated enemy's morale and disrupt their troop disposition.

His mind made up, Xu Ziling shot the divine escape and leaped to the top of a towering old tree by the creek, to survey the battlefield situation.

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Chai Shao laughed coldly and said, “If Sire does not die, we will accompany you drinking hot tea and chatting!”

Reaching out to pull Li Xiuning’s lily-white hand, he quickly withdrew.

Watching that, Kou Zhong’s heart was burning with anger; he stood blankly on the spot, unaware that Li Gang and Dou Wei had also moved away.

“Release the arrows!” Chai Shao thundered.

Amidst the ‘swish, swish!’ noise, the Li Clan’s warriors on the eaves and in the garden pulled their bows and crossbows and shot arrows toward Kou Zhong.

Chai Shao also let go of Li Xiuning’s hand. Fast as lightning, his two arm-protectors shot toward Kou Zhong, carrying with them an extremely swift and fierce power.

Even if he were able to, it would still be very difficult for Kou Zhong to block this well-coordinated salvo of arrows with the Moon in the Well in his hand, to say nothing of he still had to deal with Chai Shao’s shooting arm-protector steel truncheons, which were suffused with powerful qi.

In that instant Kou Zhong regained his senses and soared straight up to the air just before the arrows penetrating his body. Li Xiuning cried out tenderly. The moment the arrows, darts and arm-protectors hit an empty space, her body followed her sword, tailing Kou Zhong to the air.

The sound of crossbows being reloaded echoed from all directions, indicating the second salvo of arrows was about to be launched.

Kou Zhong was unable to borrow more strength; he had nothing in the air he could use as a shield. At the same time he had to deal with Li Xiuning's attack from below, while a concentrated arrows might come any time. Even Ning Daoqi, Bi Xuan and martial art masters their caliber would be at a loss to know what to do.

Nevertheless Kou Zhong remained calm without any fear. The divine escape in his left hand shot like lightning toward the peak of an old tree on his left. Just before Li Xiuning's sword reached him, he changed direction sideways and disappeared into the distant darkness.

Watching this, Chai Shao and the others could only stare blankly, but nothing can be done.

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Raising his qi, Xu Ziling sped along, and stopped only after going over a hill.

Many different trees were growing thickly at the foot of the hill, with a small river flowing gently in the middle. Far ahead he saw the small village that he saw earlier from the top of the cliff.

Just now when he was surveying the battlefield situation, he found out that the main force of the thieves scattering in all directions were all centered on this small village. Feeling strange, he decided to come over to look.

Currently the small village was as quiet as a ghost town, he did not feel anything unusual at all. After a short contemplation, he decided to run down the slope of the hill. But as he almost reached the village, suddenly an alarm went off in his heart; a feeling similar to when he felt someone was watching him from a boat docking by Yangtze River outside the city of Baling. He could not help feeling surprised.

Could it be that someone was hiding inside the house over there?

From time to time the sound of battle was still resounding from all directions, reminding him that the battle was still raging, and it was growing in intensity.

After taking a deep breath, filled with great confidence, Xu Ziling walked over to the gate of the biggest and tallest house in the village. Reaching out, he knocked the door three times.

‘Creak!’

The wooden door opened to the inside, while a sword swiftly and fiercely stabbed onto his chest.

This sword strike was not simple at all. It looked like just one strike, but it actually contained endless attacking attribute and countless changes and follow-up moves. The most formidable aspect was that while the tip of the sword was vibrating and shaking, it sent out seven, eight sword qi in succession, ‘Chi! Chi!’ continuously, enveloping all the vital acupoints around Xu Ziling’s chest and abdomen with suffocating power.

Xu Ziling had a feeling like the one he had when he was confronting Yang Xuyan, plus because he was in the open while the enemy was hidden, temporarily his eyes were filled with dots of sword tip, and his breathing could not flow freely.

When it looked like he was about to be injured by the sword, Xu Ziling’s slender hands suddenly shot up in front of his chest, his ten fingers opened up like a blooming flower, each finger carried a subtle change, and each moved gracefully beyond belief in different angle, to meet the sword tip in such a narrow space.

‘Ding! Ding! Dang! Dang!’

Amidst the continuous sweet sound like tinkling pearls on a jade tray, Xu Ziling neutralized the opponent’s swift and fierce sword move while standing steadfastly, without moving a single step.

‘Bang!’

The door closed again. But Xu Ziling was able to see the sword wielder was

none other than Shang Xiuxun wearing tight warrior outfit.

Although he felt strange on why Shang Xiuxun was not in the battlefield leading her troops but stayed here instead, but Xu Ziling was relieved because this beautiful Ranch Master was still safe and sound.

While he was about to raise his voice to call, thunderous sound of hoof beats came from both ends of the village. Xu Ziling's mind was churning at the speed of light; he flew back, leaped onto the roof of the building across the street, and lay prostrate motionless, calmly waiting for the upcoming change.

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Leaving the Green Ring Courtyard, Kou Zhong leaped onto the top of a bell tower. He felt like crying, both from grieving and bitterness of his heart, which were extremely unbearable.

Previously he thought that he could get over Li Xiuning easily, but when he saw Li Xiuning obediently let Chai Shao pulled her tender lily-white hand, Kou Zhong realized what important place she occupied in his heart. Since she already had Chai Shao protecting the flower, why would she bother minding him, an outsider?

A breeze came, rippling the pond water, distorting the image of what was at the bottom of the pond.

Kou Zhong sighed. He made up his mind to no longer pay attention to Li Xiuning, as he flew toward the Castle's wall. Apparently he decided to vent up his heartache and grievances on those hapless low-class bandits.

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The hoof beats stopped suddenly.

The two groups of riders stopped at the entrances to the village and jumped down their horses. Most of them spread out to guard the exits, while only about twenty people boldly entered the village.

From his high vantage point, Xu Ziling looked down and saw that other than four men wearing white bands on their heads holding torches high above their heads, the rest of the people all dressed differently. All carried the air of martial art masters. Apparently they were the leaders of the thieves.

The four men taking the lead looked even more distinct. Most likely they were the Four Big Bandits, who ran amuck the Yangtze River region, whose terrifying names spread out in all directions. Their age appeared to range between thirty and forty years.

Xu Ziling could not help shuddering in fear, while thinking inwardly that no wonder Shang Xiuxun was hiding in here. Because of intelligence failure, they thought the incoming enemy was only one team several thousand strong, while the fact was that the Four Big Bandits were going on an all-out attack, with the objective of seizing the Flying Horse Ranch in one move. The strange thing was that in this time of turmoil and chaos of war, how did the Four Big Bandits obtain such a great magical power and find out that Shang Xiuxun was hiding in here?

The bandits stopped in the middle of the village. One of the four leaders laughed aloud and said, "I am Xiang Batian; Jianghu friends who love to joke bestowed me the title 'not even a blade of grass grows' as my nickname; all because they don't understand me at all. The fact is that I am a man who loves and cherishes flowers; if Shang Changzhu don't believe me, just try giving yourself to me for three days, I guarantee that you will be able to correct the notion of the gravely-mistaken people all over the world."

The other thieves immediately roared in laughter; a laughter brimming with obscene overtone.

Xiang Batian's profile and outward appearance really made others did not dare to give a compliment. He was a fat man, short in stature. Not only his body was short, his limbs were also sort and stubby. He had a pot belly, and a flat, gourd-shaped head that looked like it grew out directly from his fat shoulders.

But his eyes, which were so narrow that he appeared to be eternally squinting, were gleaming with demonical, unusual blue flashes, so that people would know

that not only he was an expert in internal martial art, the path he took was that of the heretical school of martial arts.

In his hands he was holding a pair of flickering silvery light steel rings with sharp teeth on the edges, strengthening the impression that he was a dangerous and mysterious person.

Nobody knew how many people had died under his 'Soul-snatching Tooth Ring'.

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Xu Ziling, who was lying low on the back of the roof slope, suddenly felt an overwhelming and intense murderous intention, which he himself did not understand. Upon further reflection, he realized that it was because of the verbal insults were directed to Shang Xiuxun.

Standing next to Xiang Batian was a thick and solid, sturdy man, with a criss-crossing pair of wolf-teeth clubs on his back, the flesh on his face grew without restraint, and a big wart grew on his forehead, which made him appeared uglier. The man laughed wildly and said, "Changzhu recklessly went out to battle, your defeat is guaranteed. But if you are willing to give yourself to serve us, to be our companion in bed, naturally everything can be discussed." His talk was even more obscene.

The thieves roared in lewd laughter again, filled with arrogance.

Xu Ziling suddenly remembered that spy.

If there were no spies playing their tricks, how could the thieves know Shang Xiuxun's whereabouts? They would not know the Flying Horse Ranch's strength, and thus the Ranch would not take such a beating in such a short period of time.

However, as long as the Ranch was able to steadily defend the mouth of the gorge on both sides, they still could not be considered lost.

Another bandit leader laughed eerily and said, “One bed one companion. Fang Sandi’s [third (younger) brother] proposal is amazing. It’s just that Shang Changzhu is a virgin; even if in her heart she is a thousand times, then thousand times willing, but in the presence of so many people, naturally her tender face is blushing bashfully, so she is speechless! Don’t you think my, Mao Zao’s perception on women’s heart is thorough enough?”

This person’s figure was tall and thin, a picture of a bad demon scholar; he had a pair of double apostrophe thin moustache above his lips [orig. eight character (八) shaped], and a horsetail whisk stuck on his back. His attire was nondescript [lit. neither fish nor fowl]. Just by a single glance one would have been able to guess that he must be the ‘scorched earth for a thousand li’ Mao Zao, who ranked second among the Four Big Bandits.

The one who spoke earlier, the man with a wart on his forehead, the one he called the third brother, must be the ‘chicken and dogs won’t remain’, Fang Jianding.

The one Xu Ziling paid particular attention to was the only one who had not spoken yet, who ought to be the leader of the Four Big Bandits, ‘the ghosts weep the deities cry’, Cao Yinglong.

This person looked majestic; he had a pair of big ‘catching-the-wind’ ears, his forehead was covered in deep wrinkles, his cheekbones high, his cheeks sunken, his eyes appeared half-open half-closed, giving others deep impression. But his overall appearance was not as loathsome as the other three; he appeared a bit like an old pedant who does not like to talk.

In his left hand he held a spear forged entirely from refined steel; it appeared to weigh at least forty or fifty catties.

‘Ding!’

Xiang Batian raised both hands up and struck his pair of ‘Soul-snatching Tooth Ring’, creating a clear and crisp sound. The dozen or so of his men standing behind him immediately fanned out to do house-to-house search. Some even leaped onto the roof to act as a lookout.

For the next few moments, the continuous sound of doors breaking and windows shattering was heard. The murderous intention in Xu Ziling's heart was rising as he quietly gathered his power.

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With the aid of the divine escape, Kou Zhong dove through the Inner Castle, flying over the houses and leaped over the buildings, in the direction of the outer city wall. As he was passing the courtyard where he caught sight of Yuan'er and that outside ghost's tryst the other night, he had an idea and turned toward it.

He faintly heard voices from the building, but saw no lantern light.

Kou Zhong crouched low in the courtyard. After going through a fierce battle of conflicting thoughts within himself, he still could not bear to let it go. Leaping onto a tree by the house, he looked in through the window.

From this angle, he was able to see Yuan'er's lover [lit. male adulterer] from the other night and another man sitting on the chairs by the window, facing other people, who were out of his line of sight. But listening to the conversation, he determined that there were no less than ten people in that room.

With the lesson he learned last time, Kou Zhong knew that the lover's skill was quite outstanding, so he hastily employed the inner breathing from the 'Secret to Long Life', while at the same time suppressing the brilliance of his eyes.

He heard someone said, "The most brilliant aspect of our entire operation this time is the coordinated attack from the inside and the outside, and thus catching them off-guard. Moreover, with Gongzi [young master] personally presiding over it in secret, we need not worry that the Flying Horse Ranch will not fall into our hands."

The lover laughed aloud and said, "Chen Laoshi [lit. teacher] ought to stop flattering me. I, Li Tianfan, am merely a small fry who waves the banner and cheers from the side. The one holding the command flag is Shen Junshi [military strategist/advisor]."

Kou Zhong's scalp went numb instantly; it was only then did he realize the seriousness of the situation.

Military Advisor Shen was, naturally, Shen Luoyan. Li Tianfan was Li Mi's son, also Song Yuzhi's betrothed. Just the fact that these two people were sitting in this meeting was a strong and powerful indicator that Li Mi did not spare any effort to seize the Flying Horse Ranch and deal with Li Xiuning at the same time.

Sure enough, Shen Luoyan's warbling sweet voice came from inside, "Gongzi is too modest! Luoyan is ashamed and dare not accept the honor. Right now it's only the hai hour [between 9-11pm], Shang Xiuxun has become the fish in Cao Mengzhu's [alliance master/leader] net, we should also hear news from the Inner Castle."

Li Tianfan sneered and said, "Shang Xiuxun has always been a lone flower admiring itself; she has no regards toward the people of the world. In terms of ability and wisdom, how could she match Shen Junshi? While we still have a bit of time, it would be best if Shen Junshi could give us more details on our coordinated operation."

This man struck the right note, proving the adage that tiger father would not begot dog child; apparently he was a very capable leader.

Kou Zhong was seriously considering killing this son; if he succeeded, wouldn't Song Yuzhi's engagement be annulled immediately? Or else, if Li Mi succeeded in capturing Luoyang, Song Yuzhi would have to immediately marry into the Li family.

He already lost Li Xiuning; if Song Yuzhi was married to someone else, and the Song Clan and Li Mi became family, it would be a big blow to Kou Zhong, both in his public, as well as his private lives.

Thinking to this point, his heart was boiling, but his mind was still as cold as ice.

The most important thing right now was to get a feel of the strength of these people inside. Just one Shen Luoyan was already difficult to deal with, not to

mention Li Tianfan, who was even more formidable. If he was not careful, he might even lose his life here.

Ay! If only Xiao Ling were here. Now he only wanted to be the knight in shining armor [orig. hero who rescues the beauty]. If he by any chance could win her heart, nothing could be more ideal than that.

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‘Bang!’

The wooden door burst open.

A man burst into the house where Shang Xiuxun was hiding. Xu Ziling was storing up his power and waited. The moment the Four Big Bandits made some unusual move toward Shang Xiuxun, that would be the moment he would also make his move.

The Four Big Bandits looked shocked as they turned to look at both the front and rear doors of the house. Not because they heard any particular noise, but because there was no sound from the inside, not even footsteps.

This did not make any sense at all.

The man who entered the house was not an ordinary fighter. Even if the entire Flying Horse Ranch was inside the house, they could not possibly subdue him in just one move.

Xu Ziling was surprised as well; he forgot to make his move.

Cao Yinglong, who thus far has not spoken yet, suddenly said coldly, “Men! Smash the whole house to pieces for me!”

The crowd of bandits behind him thundered their acknowledgement and moved out immediately.

The martial art masters among the bandits, who were standing guard on the surrounding roofs, also had their attention focused in this place. They all held their torches high, so that the entire village was aglow.

Fang Jianding shouted harshly as he stepped out from among the crowd. Storming up the stone steps, with both palms he struck the wall next to the door.

At first the wall did not show anything unusual, but then the eaves above started to shake like in an earthquake, followed by the entire wall started to crumble and ruptured inward, slightly exposing the situation inside the hall, before it got covered by collapsing roof, the broken tiles and the rising dust.

The crowd of bandits broke in thunderous cheers and swarmed toward the house like a pack of hungry beasts sniffing the blood of their prey.

Witnessing Fang Jianding's formidable palms, Xu Ziling thought that if he was using the pair of wolf-teeth clubs on his back, it would definitely a total annihilation [orig. sweeping away a thousand armies]. But this has aroused his fighting spirit even more.

This moment he heard gusts of wind from the building to his left. The martial art masters on the bandits' side were swarming toward his hiding place. Xu Ziling sighed inwardly. Momentarily putting aside his intention of killing the bandits' leaders, his gaze quickly scanned his surroundings, near and far, trying to find a new hiding place.

In a side garden of a house just outside the range of the torches' light, he saw a small brick structure – approximately two zhang square – that looked like a shed where people put their junks. Quickly sliding down the roof, he went to hide in there.

The wooden door opened easily. Before he was able to see anything clearly, he heard a soft rumble of mechanism from the underground. But because of the incessant noise outside from the house coming down, the other noise was kind of drowned, so that he would not have to worry that the people outside would hear it.

Xu Ziling quickly closed the door. As expected, the room was filled with miscellaneous farming tools, but the middle of the room was empty. A slab of floor slowly sank down, exposing a dark and deep tunnel underneath.

Xu Ziling immediately remembered Lu Miaozi, the number one master craftsman under the heavens.

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Shen Luoyan was about to speak when a bird cry was heard from a roof on a distance. Li Tianfan immediately said, “Li Xiuning has fallen into the trap, everything proceeds as planned.”

Kou Zhong knew that they received the signal Yuan’er transmitted from the Inner Castle; he could not help smiling wryly inwardly.

Could he really ignore Li Xiuning’s safety?

Let alone this matter had direct relation to his endeavor for hegemony over the land under the heavens!

Book 10 Chapter 4 – Display Of Prowess

Xu Ziling leaped onto the beam and hid himself in the little space between the beam and the roof, suppressing the refined qi within his body, while activating his inner breathing, and quietly waiting for what would happen below him.

The noise from the collapsing wall was still continuing. Xu Ziling saw eight people came out of the tunnel in single file.

‘Bang!’

He knew that the building outside was completely gone. But naturally the bandits outside could not find anybody inside, because Shang Xiuxun had moved her troops over here.

The Third Manager Tao Shusheng’s voice was heard below, “I wonder what is Liu Zhishi doing? How come he has not arrived to lend us a hand?”

“Shut up!” Shang Xiuxun coldly snapped, “Liu Zhishi and his troops must avoid the enemy’s main force to come here according to our plan. This ruse to mislead the enemy is not working. Who told us to miscalculate the enemy’s strength? Now we have no room to advance or to retreat.”

“Someone’s coming!” Big Sister Fu’s voice was heard.

Everybody hastily held their breath and calmed their qi.

Outside, the sound of broken doors and shattered windows was still

resounding. Xu Ziling peeked down, and saw the eight people have divided themselves into four groups, with each group looking out from one window on each side of the building.

Shang Xiuxun and Big Sister Fu were standing behind one window, Tao Shusheng occupied one window alone, the other five people appeared to be Shang Xiuxun's personal guards.

Xu Ziling could imagine that Shang Xiuxun's troops must have fallen into an ambush, and this group of people must have fought their way out of the siege while protecting Shang Xiuxun, and reached this small village, which was designed by Lu Miaozi, from which they sent out a signal to Liu Zongdao to lead his troops over here to rescue them. Who would have thought that for some unknown reason, the Four Big Bandits had clear information of their whereabouts and personally pursued them? And now they were trapped in this predicament.

Tao Shusheng suddenly turned his head around to look at the other people. After making sure that everybody's eyes were focused on the outside, his right hand swiftly reached into his pocket and took out something. When he started to move his hand to throw that thing outside, Xu Ziling no longer care about anything, he shouted in low voice, "Stop it!"

The eight people inside the shed were greatly shaken; they all looked up to the beam. Tao Shusheng hastily put that thing back inside his pocket without anybody noticing.

Shang Xiuxun and the others knew very well that there was someone up there, but they did not dare to make any noise.

Xu Ziling stuck out his head and called out softly, "I am absolutely not with the thieves, and I don't have any ill-intention. I am coming down now!"

Shang Xiuxun was indeed a capable Commander-in-Chief. She knew this mysterious person's power was definitely not inferior to hers; even more, his internal energy was incomparably strange, if she had to fight with him, they would only alarm the bandits. Thereupon she waved her people to make some

room to show him her good faith.

Xu Ziling slid down along the pillar. But before his feet touched the ground, Tao Shusheng rushed one step forward and stretched out his finger to jab on his chest.

The finger created a loud swishing noise.

Shang Xiuxun wanted to stop him, but it was too late.

Xu Ziling knew that Tao Shusheng was afraid he might expose him as the traitor; letting out a cold laugh, unexpectedly he let Tao Shusheng's fingertips jabbing on his chest, but fast as lightning his right palm shot out.

Tao Shusheng was greatly delighted, thinking that even if you have your true qi protecting your body, it would be hard to resist my fierce finger power. Who would have thought that as soon as his finger touched Xu Ziling's skin and he was about to send out his power, a burst of strange and incomparably hot true qi had already penetrated his own body via his fingertip, straight toward the meridians in his hand? Not only it neutralized and scattered his own true qi, it still had enough power to burst into his channels.

Tao Shusheng's entire body shook; while his soul flew away and scattered, Xu Ziling's right palm changed from slapping to sweeping, it swept his lower abdomen.

Tao Shusheng slumped down immediately, but Xu Ziling quickly grabbed his belt and gently set him down on the ground.

Originally, he thought that at least he would have to use eight to ten moves, but had never expected that there was such a strange powerful qi in the world that he would succeed as soon as he and the enemy met face-to-face.

Including Shang Xiuxun, everybody was dumbstruck. Nobody expected that based on Tao Shusheng's power, he would be this easy to be subdued by the opponent. Fortunately, this man did not seem to bear any evil intention and only

sealed Tao Shusheng's acupoint to make him temporarily lose consciousness.

Shang Xiuxun raised her sword and pointed to this majestic looking man, brimming with wild and free charms. "Who the hell are you?" she shouted coldly.

Focusing his power in his ears, Xu Ziling listened carefully for any activity near and far; he knew that the bandits have temporarily moved their troops elsewhere to search, hence he heaved a sigh of relief.

Looking deep into Shang Xiuxun's beautiful eyes, he assumed a heroic, uninhibited manners as he said nonchalantly, "Just now your humble servant blindly spoke out and alarmed everybody. Does Changzhu know the reason?"

Shang Xiuxun coldly sized him up and down several times; she also looked at Tao Shusheng who was lying on his back under his feet. She spoke indifferently, "If friend won't state your identity clearly first, we can forget about having a civil conversation."

Xu Ziling stepped back to where Tao Shusheng was originally standing. He said, "As soon as Changzhu sends someone to search your respected subordinate's pocket, you will understand what I am talking about!"

Startled, Shang Xiuxun stared at him for a moment. Her pretty eyes shooting sharp gleams, she said in heavy voice, "Is friend saying that he is the traitor?"

Just by hearing this, Xu Ziling knew that she has already had doubt, but she merely did not dare to affirm that he was indeed the traitor! Because this month happened to be the month where it was Tao Shusheng's turn to assume the heavy responsibility of intelligence gathering.

Xu Ziling replied indifferently, "Just now I saw him about to throw something like fireworks or flares out of the window. Huh! Someone's coming!"

The sound of something splitting the air suddenly arose in all directions.

Open country by the pasture at the mouth of the gorge.

Kou Zhong was hiding on a tree, focusing his attention on Li Tianfan, Shen Luoyan, and the others, a total of fifteen people's activities. Looking at those wearing the Ranch's uniform, he saw one whose body shape, as well as appearance, looked a lot like the old man Shang Zhen. He even dressed like Shang Zhen, so that unless one was very familiar with Shang Zhen and was scrutinizing him at close distance, one would not be able to tell that this old man was a fake. Otherwise it would be very easy to pass off fish eyes for pearls [i.e. fake from the genuine].

This moment the man was lifting up his tobacco pipe and puffing smoke like swallowing clouds and blowing out fog; even Kou Zhong was very impressed.

The other people were dressed as Shang Zhen's personal guards. To Li Xiuning and those outsiders, especially with Yuan'er covering up on the side, it would be strange indeed if they were not deceived.

The most formidable part of this scheme was that Li Xiuning was lured away from the Castle, plus although Li Xiuning had the power, she could not bring a large number of her men to go to a meeting. If the fake Shang Zhen plus Li Tianfan, Shen Luoyan and their numerous martial art masters rose together in rebellion, their chance of success would be quite high.

The one posing as Shang Zhen was actually the one they called 'Teacher Chen'. In terms of martial art skill, he was second only to Li Tianfan and Shen Luoyan. In addition, there was also a thirty-something man surnamed Bai and a thin man called Ma Fang, who seemed to be the martial art experts within this group. The former had double axes on his back, while the latter had a sword hanging from his waist. The other dozen or so men appeared to be between twenty and twenty-five years old, and all of them had protruding taiyang acupoint [on the temples]. Just by looking at their skill in climbing the mountain and scaling the ridges while they stole into the pasture, it was clear that these people were not ordinary fighters.

Shen Luoyan looked cold and detached; it looked like she lost a bit of weight,

but was still very beautiful. She wore a hat to conceal her long hair, and was dressed in a man's clothes, which increased her attractiveness.

From time to time there was the sound of horse neighing breaking the tranquility of the pasture.

Right now all the Ranch people were concentrated on both entrances to the gorge and in the Castle, the pasture was left with only about a dozen guards, which was akin to leaving it unguarded at all. Plus this place was part of sparse forest near the eastern gorge, and it was very late at night with only the hazy moon and dim stars providing illumination. If anything should happen here, nobody would know.

The entire plot was so perfect [orig. seamless heavenly clothes].

The only flaw was Kou Zhong.

Shen Luoyan was still briefing her men on the timing and the method of their operation when Li Xiuning arrived.

Kou Zhong applied more power to his eyes and looked at the direction of the Green Ring Courtyard. He saw seven [sic] figures appeared at the edge of the sparse forest. Li Gang and Dou Wei took the lead, followed by Li Xiuning and Yuan'er in the middle, and Chai Shao and another young martial art master closing the rear; they quickly came near.

Kou Zhong had a thought; he quietly slid down the tree.

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Shang Xiuxun's countenance changed, "Into the tunnel!" she ordered, while her palm pressed on Big Sister Fu's back, pushing her beloved maid to enter the tunnel first.

The others hurriedly followed.

Grabbing Tao Shusheng's belt, Shang Xiuxun hesitated a moment. And then she turned to Xu Ziling and said, "Friend, get down!"

Xu Ziling smiled slightly and said, "I'll stay to deal with the enemy. Changzhu, don't forget to close the entrance."

Shang Xiuxun was grabbing Tao Shusheng and jumping into the tunnel; hearing him, she looked at him in shock.

By the time the two sets of eyes met, the door shattered and someone charged in, brandishing his saber.

Xu Ziling shouted loudly and with all his strength concentrated on his fist, he sent out a punch over the empty space.

'Bang!'

Unexpectedly, the man was unable to withstand at all and was thrown back with his body, along with his saber, spun like a windmill, knocking down five or six bandits who were following behind him; all had their bones broken and their viscera shattered. No survivor. And thus the power of the fist was proven.

Watching this, Shang Xiuxun was dumbstruck. It was not until Xu Ziling urged her again that she went down the tunnel and closed the entrance.

Two windows on the left and right shattered at the same time, two spears shot in like the tongue of a viper.

Xu Ziling waited until he heard the sound of the tunnel door closing, and then his hands spread out to the left and right to grab the two spears; shook and broke them. Brought by their own momentum, the two spear-wielders stumbled toward him.

Xu Ziling pulled his hands back. Using his elbows he struck left and right toward the two men's chests. They spurted fresh blood and fell to the ground.

Without even looking, Xu Ziling proceeded by throwing the two broken spears backwards and hit a man who had just leaping in through the window right on his chest. The man fell onto the window frame without uttering any noise, the upper part of his body was knocked out of the window that he was hanging face up on the window sill, he died a horrifying and bizarre death.

Outside the building suddenly fell silent, except for the crackling noise of the torches, and nobody else dared to charge inside.

Suddenly Cao Yinglong thundered from the outside, “Shang Xiuxun, if you have guts, get out and compete real skill with the ol’ Cao.” Apparently Xu Ziling’s blitzkrieg method has provoked his ferocious character.

A ten-thousand-zhang heroic feeling welled up in Xu Ziling’s heart; he laughed aloud as he walked out the door leisurely with his hands behind his back.

Tangled bodies lay outside the building, dead bodies in all odd conditions that were difficult to describe.

Led by Cao Yinglong, the Four Big Bandits were standing in a row, while their men spread out in crescent moon formation behind them, while all kinds of weapons, spears, bows and arrows, sabers, axes, swords and lances, flickering incessantly under the torches’ light, with thick murderous aura filling the air, plus more than a hundred pair of eyes, all focused on Xu Ziling.

When the crowd of bandits saw the one walking out was not Shang Xiuxun, they were all stunned.

“Who are you?” the ‘not even a blade of grass grows’ Xiang Batian roared.

Xu Ziling calmly replied, “Who I am, you are not even worthy to ask!”

The crowd of bandits roared in anger; more than a dozen arrows were immediately shot toward him.

The two groups slowly came toward each other.

Li Xiuning was also a prudent and cautious person; she slowed down and stopped at approximately three zhang from the fake Shang Zhen and the others. Raising her cupped fist, she greeted, “Housekeeper, how are you?”

The fake Shang Zhen took a step forward and led the others to return the courtesy. He said, “These are all my trusted subordinates who have been with me for many years. Princess Ning may set your heart at ease.” This man could even imitate Shang Zhen’s voice with seventy, eighty-percent similarity. Added to that, he was speaking in low voice, so that anybody who was not familiar with him would find it hard to tell the difference.

Li Xiuning cast a sidelong glance toward Yuan’er first before saying, “Xiuning apologizes for pulling back Housekeeper from your duty at the eastern gorge. Why didn’t you all ride instead of walk?”

The fake Shang Zhen putting an air of sighing and said, “Naturally it’s to conceal our movements from the enemy. Ay! Huh?”

Footsteps were heard from behind Li Xiuning’s group. Both groups turned to look in astonishment.

They heard someone yelled, “Princess! Sorry, I am done [the word here refers to ‘relieving oneself’] now! It feels good!”

Li Xiuning’s delicate body shook severely, because she recognized Kou Zhong’s voice.

Under everybody’s watchful eyes, a full-bearded man with boorish appearance and a nose like a hawk, appeared from among the trees, rushing over, while rubbing his hand over his tummy, skipping and leaping.

Chai Shao and the others knew this guy was formidable, their countenance changed; but as they were about to pull their weapon out, Li Xiuning signaled

them to stop. "I said you don't need to come," she called out in tender voice, "Why didn't you obey me?"

Kou Zhong nodded. Changing his voice, he said, "Princess, don't be angry! Princess, don't be angry!"

On the other side, the fake Shang Zhen, Li Tianfan, Shen Luoyan and the others were watching with knitted eyebrows; they were all confused.

With Li Xiuning's respectable status, how could her subordinate be that rude by saying 'relieving himself' right in front of her?

Kou Zhong acted as if he did not see Li Xiuning; swaying to the left and swaggering to the right, he walked over under Chai Shao and the others' angry glare toward the space between the two groups. Clearing his throat, he said, "Princess, please forgive me, let Xiaoren do the introduction first, hey!"

Pointing to Li Tianfan, who was standing behind the fake Shang Zhen, he spoke as if he was reciting a poetry, "This is Li Tianfan Gongzi, the Wagang Fort's Duke Mi's only son."

Li Xiuning and the others' countenance immediately changed greatly.

In a flash Kou Zhong was already standing by Yuan'er; with 'hee, hee, ha, ha' he said, "And this pretty madam is Housekeeper Zhen's new concubine; her former status, however, was Li Gongzi's wom ... Ah!"

Knowing her identity was exposed, Yuan'er could not stay calm anymore; she reached inside her sleeve and pulled out a poisonous dagger, with which she stabbed Kou Zhong and Li Xiuning.

As soon as Kou Zhong exposed Li Tianfan's identity, Li Xiuning was already on guard against Yuan'er. With a tender humph her green-jade sleeve swept across the stabbing tip of the dagger.

Kou Zhong pretended to be horrified and jumped back to evade, while

shouting and yelling, “Murder! Murder!” and rushed toward the fake Shang Zhen.

Seeing Kou Zhong was no longer there to stop her, Yuan’er pulled her dagger away from Li Xiuning’s sleeve. She was just about to leap back when Chai Shao noiselessly pressed his finger onto her back. Yuan’er immediately slumped down to the ground.

Ignoring the fake Shang Zhen and his men’s murderous look, Kou Zhong laughed aloud and said, “This gentlemen who impersonate the Housekeeper is called Chen Laoshi, as for his great name ... humph!”

A young man standing next to Li Tianfan was unable to hold back; he rushed forward while brandishing his saber to hack Kou Zhong’s left shoulder. His saber technique was swift and precise.

‘Ring!’

The Moon in the Well left its scabbard.

Everybody was stunned with the yellow glow’s sudden appearance; but before they could see clearly what it was, ‘Dang!’ the attacker and his saber were flying backward in swirling motion. Even after landing on the ground, he was still rolling away for a zhang or so, and stopped only after crashing against a tree, and died on the spot.

Such an overbearing and fantastic saber power, nobody had ever seen it before. Those in Li Tianfan’s side who wanted to make their move immediately changed their mind.

Acting as if he had done nothing unusual, Kou Zhong nonchalantly put the saber back into its scabbard as he stepped over toward Shen Luoyan, who was standing on the other side of the fake Shang Zhen. But before he said anything, Shen Luoyan already spoke coldly, “Stop dressing up as a god, playing the devil. Where is your good Xiongdi?”

Kou Zhong leaned over; with a brazen face he said, “He is afraid of you, hence he is hiding!”

Everybody in Li Tianfan’s side was stunned; they had never expected that these two people were old acquaintances. But they could not remember which formidable Wulin figures had appearance like he did.

Shen Luoyan’s beautiful eyes exuded a singularly complex expression; she said softly, “Tell him to come out and kill me!”

Kou Zhong backed off and laughed aloud, “Who will have the heart to kill Shen Junshi whose beauty captivating even the birds and beasts?” [Orig. chen (shen) yu luo yan - fish sink, goose alights, an idiom from Zhuangzi, which was a play of words on Shen Luoyan’s name.]

‘Qiang!’

The Moon in the Well left its scabbard again.

Kou Zhong straightened up his back; immediately an overbearing aura of total annihilation [sweeping a thousand armies] filled the air. He sternly shouted, “Other than Shen Junshi, nobody will be spared!”

The cold light from his eyes shrouded Li Tianfan. The Moon in the Well slashed out, its power fierce and strong beyond compare, yet it also carried a swift and nimble, fantastic feeling with it.

The spiraling power enveloped the entire battlefield.

Li Xiuning’s charming body trembled lightly, knowing deep in her heart that she would never forget Kou Zhong’s overbearing and moving spirit in front of her eyes. Stealing a glance toward Chai Shao, who was standing by her side, she saw his frightened look as he fixed his gaze on Kou Zhong. Her fragrant heart could not help feeling slightly guilty.